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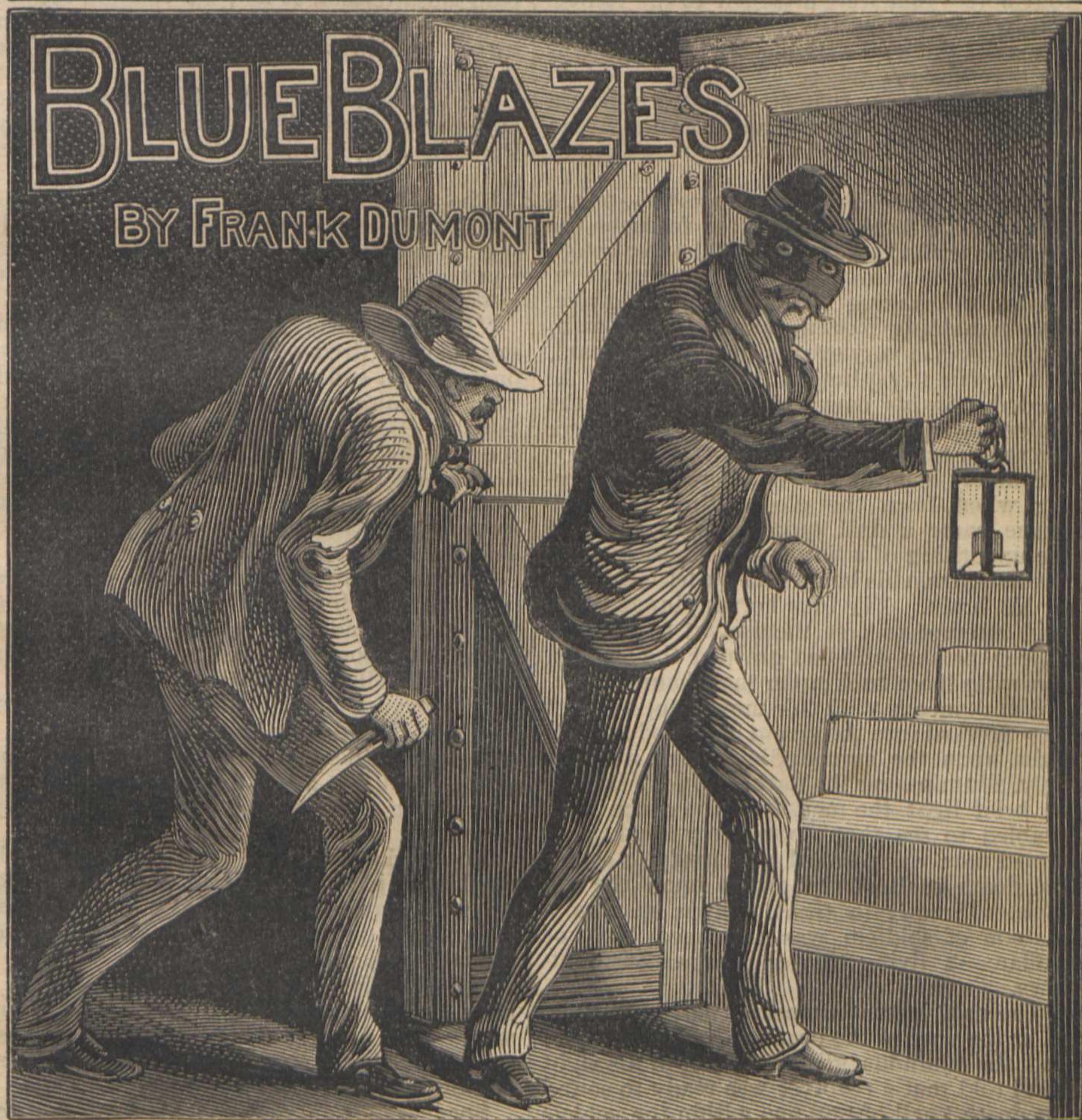
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BLUE BLAZES

BY FRANK DUMONT



"COME ALONG; WHILE THE LIGHT HOLDS A SPARK, WE MUST MAKE GOOD USE OF IT."

Blue-Blazes;

OR,

The Break o' Day Boys of Rocky Bar.

BY FRANK DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "THE BRANDED HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I. A WOMAN'S FACE.

"Now, gentlemen! have your hands onto your weapons, for in seven seconds we will be in the ravine and I predict a pic-nic!"

The speaker was seated upon the heavy Concord coach, grasping the reins of the four horses that were attached to the vehicle and whose clattering hoofs awakened the echoes of the wild region. Beside the driver sat several men whose eyes endeavored to pierce the gloom that settled down, like a black pall, as the vehicle rolled into a ravine—or rather the huge cleft in the mountain of rock.

Within the coach sat two persons—one, a pale, girlish form, upon whose features the death angel had set his seal. The low cough indicated the pulmonary disease that was relentlessly dragging her to an early grave. The remaining passenger was an old man, muffled to the very eyes with a woolen scarf, and apparently plunged in slumber, for he heeded not his companion opposite, or the violent rocking of the coach as it rolled over the rough trail.

Scarcely had the driver uttered the warning when, from the gloom directly in advance, came a dull, quick puff—not unlike the uncorking of a bottle—and the driver fell headlong from his box with a bullet imbedded in his brain. The four horses plunged in a mad attempt to free themselves from some unseen person who had grasped the leaders, throwing them back upon their haunches.

Simultaneous with this movement a rocket flew upward into the gloom and shed its blue light upon the surroundings, for a moment only, illuminating the dark ravine. During its brief light the men upon the coach were enabled to see that upon every boulder an armed man was perched and ready to sound the death-knell of the group upon the vehicle. Directly in front, drawn up like a platoon of soldiers, was an armed body of ruffians—a living barrier of merciless outlaws.

The next instant a masked person appeared at the door of the coach and flung it open, and the ominous glitter of steel in his right hand told that a revolver was ready to sound the death-knell of any one within the vehicle offering resistance.

The masked robber peered into the coach and suddenly opened the slide of a bull's-eye lantern, sending a ray of light full upon the features of the gray-haired person reclining upon the back seat.

"Come, sir!" said the mask, "step out of the coach. You're the person I want to interview. Be lively, for time's precious!"

The road-agent's voice was quite pleasant, and his command was given devoid of the swagger and coarseness generally attributed to the "chevalier" of the road.

The robber observed the female seated in the coach, but her features were turned from him as if his voice had sent a thrill of terror into her soul, and she sat crouched in the corner, pale and motionless. The road-agent paid no attention to her, but assisted the old gentleman to alight from the coach, and then turned the rays of his lantern full upon the passenger.

"Now, sir, you will please remove the boot upon your right foot, and be lively about it, too," ordered the road-agent, decisively.

The old gentleman stood aghast, and his tongue refused to articulate. He was regarding the masked robber, as if endeavoring to penetrate the black cloth that covered the latter's features.

"Come, be lively! We're losing time, and my men are tired of holding their rifles in one position and taking chances. In spite of your disguise, you see that I know you, Spencer Gibson, and that I am well aware of the fact that, within the curiously contrived double-soled boot you wear upon the right foot, lie concealed ten thousand dollars in treasury notes of large denominations. Now, sir—shell out!"

The gray-haired person addressed by the road-agent as Spencer Gibson gave vent to a low groan, and without another word removed the boot indicated. This the robber took, and called an outlaw to his side

"Take your bowie and remove the sole of this boot," he directed.

Instantly the point of the knife was inserted, and by a dexterous movement removed the sole, exposing a cavity, artfully concealed.

The road-agent chief took from this curious hiding-place a small package of banknotes that lay compressed between the pieces of leather, and then handed the boot back to the old gentleman.

"There, sir! There is your boot, and as I have the money, you are free to go your way. The quicker the better, for I can assure you that your fair daughter will be anxious concerning your safety."

Spencer Gibson replaced his boot, and re-entered the stage coach.

"Bear a hand here, several of you," said the bandit leader, "and place the body of the driver upon the coach. The poor fool tried his game just once too often. He's been in the habit of whipping up his horses and dashing through this locality to escape us, whenever he had a valuable cargo, but he won't try the game any more. As he isn't a married man, no family is left to mourn his loss. Come, boys; no delay. Delays are dangerous, you know, and Blue-Blazes uses for his motto—'Procrastination is the thief of time.'"

Several burly ruffians seized the limp body of the dead driver, and placed it upon the roof of the coach.

"Now, gentlemen," commanded the bandit chief, "hand over your valuables, please. Don't compel me to ask for them a second time."

This was addressed to the group of passengers upon the vehicle, and they needed no repetition of the demand; for they delivered articles of value to the tall robber delegated by the leader to receive the booty.

"Now, gentlemen! one of you take the reins and drive on. Keep straight ahead, and you will reach Boise City in less than an hour. Hold! one moment!" cried the road-agent; "there's a lady in the coach. I had almost forgotten her."

Blue-Blazes, as the robber chief had announced himself, advanced to the door and turned the rays of his lantern upon her features. She turned her eyes upon the masked robber as the light of the lantern flashed into the coach.

With a wild yell, and a curse upon his lips, the desperado hurled the lantern into the gloom and dashed away from the spot as if a horde of demons were at his heels!

He fled into the darkness, trembling in every limb, and gasping for breath, while oaths came from his lips. Finally he paused.

"What is *she* doing here?" he hissed. "Why does she track me like an avenging Nemesis? Did she recognize me? Curse her, I did not dream I should ever look upon her again!"

Strange that the bold outlaw should flee from the pale-featured woman reclining in the coach! Strange that her face struck terror to his soul and caused him to beat a hasty retreat from the scene of the robbery, abandoning his comrades and all thoughts of booty! True, he had the package of National bank-notes in his pocket, but he did not remain to estimate the value of the cash and trinkets handed over by the passengers.

Even as he paused in the wild locality, and listened, he heard the creaking of the wheels, and the sound of the horses' hoofs upon the hard surface of the road; and he knew that

the coach was *en route* for the town. A sigh of relief escaped his lips, and he tore aside the mask he wore to enable the cool night wind to fan his brow. Drops of perspiration stood upon his forehead, and this betrayed the emotion caused by the sudden and unexpected discovery he had made.

The face of this road-agent was that of a young man scarcely more than four and twenty years of age. A silken mustache of raven hue shaded thin lips that were now compressed with nervousness as their owner stood like a statue listening to the receding coach, his long hair waving in the night air and his hand trembling upon the hilt of a revolver.

This was the desperado who, under cover of his mask, and surrounded by lawless comrades, ruled the road and demanded toll from all who traveled over the trail.

Reward after reward had been offered, both from Boise City, Silver City and Rocky Bar, but all the luring rewards had failed to entrap the ruffian or bribe his confederates into betraying their leader.

At the period of which we write the silver regions bordering upon the Salmon River and its chain of mountains in Idaho, were infested with all the lawless element of the States. Here the criminal sought a haven among kindred spirits and struck terror to the honest miner's heart, and the traveler compelled to journey in coaches considered himself fortunate if he escaped these "chevaliers."

"Blue Blazes" was without doubt the most reckless and daring of his class, and his deeds were related with bated breath by his victims as they sat about the fire of the hotels in Boise City. The scoundrel was known by no other name, and his appearance and identity were a perfect mystery. It was even whispered that the members of his own infamous league had never looked upon his features.

A blue rocket shooting upward into the murky darkness always heralded the coming of the outlaw and his men. The robbers were armed with air-guns, and thus were enabled to pick off their victims from their places of concealment without betraying their near presence by the flash of fire-arms or the report of explosives.

Thus the fiery rocket, of the dazzling color mentioned, gave the sobriquet of Blue-Blazes to the desperado, and that name became a terror in the silver regions. The outlaw chief remained listening to the coach as it rolled away toward the city; then he retraced his steps toward the scene of the attack.

"She is journeying toward Boise City—tracking me—no doubt of it. Her presence in this locality and at such a time is danger-

ous to my plans. She must be removed just as soon as possible; my safety demands it, for she will either denounce me or remove me."

A blue rocket pierced the gloom, and shed its brilliancy for a moment upon the desolate landscape.

"The coach has passed the outer line of pickets," said the border outlaw, "and that's the signal of 'all's well.'"

Blue-Blazes retraced his steps, but before he had traversed half of the distance to the trail a form came toward him and a low whinny echoed close at hand. A moment later and a horse stood beside the man.

"Tired of waiting for me," said he, softly. "Come, my beauty; you and I must reach Boise City with the speed of the wind."

He vaulted into the saddle, and the steed dashed forward, like a bolt from a crossbow.

CHAPTER II.

"DEAD AT YOUR FEET."

BOISE CITY was fairly alive with its swarms of miners, speculators, gamblers and men of sundry occupations, although it was near the hour of midnight.

The saloons and gambling resorts were in full blast and groups of players and spectators surrounded every table. Crouched near the doorway of a spacious gambling den was the form of a female who eagerly scanned the features of each person entering or leaving the den. From her place of observation she could easily observe the face of each person without fear of discovery.

"Perhaps I am mistaken. But the voice—can I be mistaken in that? No—no!" she murmured, "my days are numbered and I must see him."

She drew back into the shadow of the doorway, for a horseman drew rein before the saloon and dismounted. He secured the horse to a post and strode toward the open door.

The light fell upon his features and from the lips of the hidden watcher came a low, quick cry, and the next moment the woman had darted forward and stood directly in his path.

The young man started back nervously and for a moment stood as if rooted to the spot. The woman approached and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"I have found you at last," said she.

"Why do you follow me?" he gasped.

"Why? Why should I not seek to find you? Who else but you can repair the great wrong? I have waited patiently and sought

for you far and wide until my efforts have at last succeeded. To-night I saw you—saw you in the act of robbery—a highway—"

"Hush! not a word of that!" warned the young man huskily. "At least not here, where my life trembles in the balance. Now tell me what is it you want?"

"Nothing! I wanted to look upon you. You basely deserted me. You have blasted my young life. Look upon me! I am but a wreck!"

"You have but yourself to blame. You ceased to love me and proved untrue."

"'Tis false," she cried vehemently. "This is the coward's ready excuse after he has basely deserted and betrayed the heart that loved and trusted him."

"I did not desert you until I was satisfied that you had taken your love from me," said the man in a sniveling tone of voice.

"Death rights everything, and when that comes you will know how deeply I loved you. You will know that you were the heart-spring of my life and soul. I do not ask you to believe it now. I love you to-day as I have loved you in the days of our early acquaintance. Remember, Fred, the dying will not speak false."

The woman made an effort to withdraw some object from a side pocket, and Fred started backward nervously. She noticed the act and a contemptuous smile played upon her lips.

"Do not fear me," said she. "I would not harm you. True, in my angry moments I registered a vow to kill you, for I dreaded to lose you, but now the angel of death is near at hand and the end is fast approaching."

She was seized with a violent fit of coughing and for a few moments she stood endeavoring to recover her power of speech. Fred recoiled again, for he saw an object glistening in the grasp of her hand.

"Tell me, can I do anything for you? Your presence here will ruin my plans, and sadly interfere with my prospects; yet I will cast these all aside if I can befriend you. My love you can never again obtain—"

"I do not seek it," she said, in a low, wailing tone. "Too late!—too late!"

She trembled violently, and would have fallen to the pavement if he had not reached forth his arm.

"I said I did not seek your love," said she, faintly. "What is this world to me without it? Oh! if I could but crush you out of my heart as I have striven! But it cries for you, and will not banish you. Oh, Fred! my hours are numbered. Tell me that you still love me."

She turned her pale face toward him, and her eyes shone with a strange light—a glitter

that told of wild emotions sweeping through her brain.

"Edith, we can never be but friends. Let us forget the past and—"

Further utterance was cut short by the crack of the pistol which the woman grasped in her hand, and the bullet sped into her own brain. She turned her large dark eyes upon his face, and vainly endeavored to speak. The words died away upon her lips, and, before he could prevent it, she fell to the pavement.

Fred gazed horror-stricken upon the body of the suicide at his feet. The villain looked upon the form of his poor victim—the woman whom he had betrayed and abandoned, and a shudder swept through his frame.

Only a moment did he pause to view the prostrate form of the young woman whom he had called Edith; then he dashed into the gambling-den.

Hardly had he entered the portals, when a young man emerged from an adjacent doorway and bent over the motionless form. Placing his hand over her heart, he saw that life was extinct. As he arose, he observed a crushed paper in the hand of the suicide. Scarcely knowing what he did, he took the paper from the death-grasp and thrust it into his pocket. All this had occurred in the brief space of a few moments, for even as the young man had placed the paper in his pocket, he was surrounded by a number of men who, attracted to the spot, gathered about the dead body. Among the number was Fred, the identical person who had witnessed the suicide's act—the villain who had been the direct cause of the tragedy.

"Young man, what is your name?" said a stout personage, addressing the youth who had taken the paper from the dead woman's hand.

"Robert Warden, sir," he replied, calmly, although the scowling sea of faces surrounding him plainly told that he was suspected of the murder.

"I am the sheriff of this county," announced the stout person, "and I have a word or two to say to you."

Robert expected to hear the dread summons of the sheriff, or worse—to find himself in the hands of the excited crowd who would execute lynch law in a summary manner. Warden chanced to glance toward the doorway, and his eyes rested upon the features of the man whom the suicide called Fred. Their eyes met, and that one glance spoke volumes. The evil face of the villain disappeared as its owner slunk away on the outskirts of the crowd. But the face was photographed upon Warden's mind.

The look upon the scoundrel's face betrayed him; and that look and the peculiar ex-

pression of the eyes were indelibly fixed upon Robert's mind, and he recalled them at will.

Each moment he expected to hear himself denounced as the murderer. The mob was uttering threats, and the murmur grew louder and louder as the crowd viewed the form lying upon the pavement.

"Gentlemen—one word with you all," said the sheriff. "I happened to be in the locality and saw the deed. The woman took her own life. I saw that myself; but, gentlemen, there is a black-hearted villain—a scoundrel that caused this poor girl to commit such an act."

The crowd uttered another cry, and Warden was the center of all eyes.

"Not he—gentlemen—not he" cried the sheriff; "you know that I wouldn't shield a murderer—no indeed!—but that's not the man; I saw him approach the body *after* the deed had been committed. Bear a hand here gentlemen, and let us convey this poor girl's body to a place of shelter. After she is attended to we will look after the devil that caused her to take her life."

Several willing pairs of hands raised the body tenderly from the pavement and conveyed it to a hotel close by.

The crowd separated slowly. The shooting of a man would not have occasioned any surprise, but a woman—why it was sacrilege, and woe to the scoundrel who would have dared to thus take the life of one of the gentler sex or be in any way responsible for the act! A rope and the nearest tree would surely await him. No matter how rough and lawless the mining regions may be, a respectable woman will command respect, and a hundred champions will leap to her rescue if insult be offered to her.

The sheriff placed the body of the unfortunate girl in a small room and securely locked the door.

"Now, sir, we will see that she is decently buried. Do you know who she is—or where she came from?"

"I have a clew," replied Robert, as he took the crushed paper from his pocket and carefully opened it in order to examine the writing. It was written by the poor suicide and contained the following, penned in a neat feminine hand:

"Heaven forgive me for the crime I am about to commit—self-murder. Betrayed, abandoned, and friendless, what more can I do but seek to regain his love or die at his feet?"

EDITH GRAY."

Robert and the sheriff examined the paper, and the official finally refolded it and huskily said:

"Of course we don't know who is to blame, but I will make a proposal to you. For humanity's sake, you and I will try to hunt

down the man that brought this girl to an early grave."

"There's my hand upon it, sir," said Robert, eagerly, and the two men clasped hands; the compact was sealed.

The sheriff retained the paper, and after a few moments' conversation the twain separated.

Robert wended his way toward his boarding-house, his mind filled with the events of the sad tragedy and its cause.

"No matter," said he, half-aloud, "I will know *that* face wherever and whenever I see it again."

A dark form glided from a doorway, and with quick, cat-like movements it followed at Robert's heels. There was a dull thud and a suppressed cry as the young man fell to the pavement.

He was conscious of being dragged into a doorway and carried down a flight of steps; then all was a blank, for his senses deserted him.

CHAPTER III.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY.

ROBERT's first sign of returning consciousness was evinced by feeling a chill that almost penetrated to the bone of every limb. A deep gloom prevented him from observing the place into which he now found himself prostrate upon a damp earthen floor. The moist and cold earth had revived him, and the water dripping upon his features had recalled him to consciousness.

His hair was matted with the blood that had oozed from the wound upon his head and a dull pain racked his brain.

At first he was bewildered, and failed to comprehend the situation, but soon the events of the night came vividly to his mind, and again the image of the evil face of the suicide's companion was before him.

Then he sought an explanation for his present situation. Why had he thus been followed and his life attempted? Who could wish to remove him? Who was it that held him as a captive in the dismal quarters wherein he now lay?

He sought in vain to find an answer to his queries.

He knew not of an enemy in the mining-town, and if robbery had been the object, why then were the watch and chain that he wore still safe in his pocket? Perhaps he had been mistaken for some one who had incurred the displeasure of the desperadoes infesting the Salmon river regions? Or perhaps he had been "spotted" because he had lingered in conversation with the sheriff?

Then came the thoughts that were ever uppermost in his mind, and even in the black

gloom of his prison-like cellar he fancied that he saw the sweet face of Elsie Gibson.

Her wealth of golden hair appeared like a halo of glory about her Madonna-like face, and Robert instinctively murmured her name. Even as her name lingered upon her lips there was a slight noise at what appeared to be the door leading into the cellar. A heavy footfall sounded without. A chain fell to the floor with a dull rattle and the rays of a bull's-eye lantern flashed into the cellar, dispelling the darkness.

A tall, masked figure descended a few broken steps, and then flashed the lantern's rays in several directions until the light rested upon the features of Robert Warden.

The masked figure started back as if surprised to see the young man erect.

"So you're alive, are you?" came in subdued tones from beneath the mask. "It's a pity you've recovered, for you've got to take a journey to that unknown land. In other words, your moments are numbered."

"Who are you?" demanded Robert.

"It matters not to you. A doomed man has no need of knowing anything that is meant to be a secret. The information would be of no benefit to you," answered the mask, sullenly.

"Why am I confined in this place?"

"For several reasons! One is that you are in my path, and once you are removed I will consider myself much safer. Let this suffice to satisfy your curiosity. Robert Warden, you are a doomed man. This underground place will be your tomb. Gaze upon yonder mass of decaying mortality! Those bones and tattered garments were once part of a human being who, doomed to death in this same place, met the dark angel, and that is all that is left to tell of his fate!"

Robert's eyes glanced in the direction indicated and saw the ghastly remains of a mortal partially concealed beneath a tattered blanket. The grinning skull had rolled away several feet from the rest of the skeleton. The boots lay under the torn edge of the blanket and the lantern's rays cast a weird light upon the horrible picture.

The masked person noticed the expression of both surprise and horror upon Robert's face. A chuckle escaped from beneath the mask.

"What do you think of the prospects?" he asked derisively. "Your form will mingle with that skeleton in less than two hours. Depend upon it!" and the mask turned to depart.

"One word with you," cried Robert. "I do not know of an enemy in Boise City, and if I have crossed your path in any shape or form you should be manly enough to tell me, or at least reveal yourself."

"It is not necessary," responded the ruffian. "You are a dangerous person while living. Once you are dead I will cease to anticipate any trouble. Prepare for the worst, for an executioner will visit you who knows not the meaning of the word pity, and whose ears are deaf to supplications for mercy. I have looked upon you alive for the last time," and he extended his hand in a dramatic manner.

That moment Robert's eyes obtained a glimpse of a curious opal ring upon the man's finger. It shone like the eye of a basilisk in the rays of the lantern.

Warden's attention was riveted upon the ring so intently that he failed to notice that his visitor was slowly descending the steps.

A moment later and the door closed, the chain rattled and the damp cellar was plunged in gloom.

Robert was alone—alone with the ghastly relic of the previous occupant of this dismal prison. A swarm of rats added to the horrors of the underground prison, for the bold vermin dashed hither and thither as the light disappeared. Robert wondered how he had escaped from the vicious animals as he lay insensible and completely at their mercy.

By degrees they became bolder and he kicked and crushed them beneath the heels of his boots, as he strode to and fro in his narrow prison.

An hour dragged by wearily, and the only signs of life were the hungry rodents that fairly leaped upon him in their hungry desperation.

Suddenly his ears caught the faint sound of approaching footsteps. Some one was nearing his prison den. Perhaps it was the executioner that the masked person had threatened to send? The footsteps halted at the door, a faint light glimmered through the cracks of the heavy planks, and the chain rattled to the earth.

Robert was unarmed, and he knew that the emissary would not venture into the cellar without a weapon to aid him in his murderous work. The youth determined not to yield without a desperate struggle, and he prepared to meet the unknown destroyer.

Warden had noticed that the door of the cellar opened inward, and, quick as a flash, a plan of escape presented itself.

Even as the chain fell to the earth he glided quickly to the steps and the door began to open as the executioner pushed the heavy barrier before him. As the door swung around, Robert glided behind it, and thus avoided the stream of light that shot forth from the lantern borne by a hideous hunchback, whose glittering eyes peered above the edge of a huge red scarf bound in many folds about his neck.

This dwarf was muffled up in such a manner that nothing could be seen of his features but the nose and evil eyes, that fairly blazed in their sockets. With one hand he held the lantern, and directed its rays into the cellar. In his talon-like fingers he clutched a long, glittering knife, whose blade reflected the light of the lantern. A coarse woolen jacket enveloped his body, and the ugly hump between the shoulders almost drew the garment away from his waist, threatening to burst the seams asunder.

Warden had but time to observe this monstrosity, when the deformed came cautiously down the steps, evidently seeking the exact position of his victim. The remains partially concealed beneath the blanket caught his eye, for he directed the rays of the bull's-eye toward the spot.

"Hello! that's not him!" he growled. "The captain told me he was here, and to let daylight into him—but where is he?"

The reply was a terrific blow, and the deformed wretch was hurled head-foremost to the damp floor of the cellar, while the swarm of rats dashed away into their retreats as the monster landed in their midst.

In a moment he was upon his feet, and with a scream resembling the cry of a wild beast he sought to recover the knife that had slipped from his grasp. Robert leaped down and kicked aside the overturned lantern, and the next instant he was struggling in the grasp of the infuriated wretch.

A rough and tumble fight ensued upon the slimy floor of the cellar. Both men were struggling to obtain the knife that lay close by, for in that slender blade lay death or escape. One or the other must perish.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE DEN.

THE hunchback was a powerful fellow and his immense strength was telling in his favor as he struggled with his lithe adversary. Robert was weak from loss of blood, but he knew that life was at stake; he strained every nerve to prevent the cripple from obtaining the knife. Warden did not wish to take the life of the deformed creature, although the latter bit and screamed like an infuriated wildcat. Suddenly the hunchback, by a most powerful effort, hurled Robert toward the knife, and before the youth could recover himself, the cripple had seized the weapon, and uttering a cry of triumph, dashed toward the young man. Blinded with rage and the very thoughts of an easy victory—the hideous wretch came onward with a malignant gleam in his wolfish eyes and a howl issuing from his lips.

The young man hesitated no longer, but leaped forward to meet the advancing assas-

sin and seized the upraised hand. A short, quick struggle, and Robert had disarmed the cripple and wrested the dagger from him. Then the keen blade was driven deep into the body of the hunchback.

A despairing cry, a cry resembling the dying screech of the panther, and the wretch fell to the slimy floor of the cellar in the throes of death. A few convulsive struggles and the would-be-assassin was dead.

For a moment Robert stood horror-stricken with the dripping blade grasped in his hand. It was the first time he had ever shed the blood of a fellow mortal, and the young man was seized with remorse as he contemplated the lifeless mass at his feet.

The overturned lantern shed a ghostly light upon the group and formed a strange picture in that dismal underground chamber.

The struggle had occupied but a few moments, and even as the hunchback expired, the sound of footsteps again echoed in the passage leading to the cellar. The cries of the cripple had reached listening ears and help was coming, or perhaps the masked person was at hand to aid his confederate.

Robert saw but one chance of escape and he quickly seized upon it.

He tore the woolen scarf from about the neck of the dead hunchback and fastened it about his own.

A moment later and the dead man's jacket had changed owners also; then, by aid of his own coat—Robert, thrusting the garment beneath the jacket, well up toward the shoulders made a most natural hump and presented a counterpart of the dead hunchback.

He then extinguished the flickering lantern and breathlessly awaited the person rapidly approaching. A second later and the masked figure appeared in the low doorway.

The mask still bore his own lantern and its expiring rays failed to clearly reveal the entire chamber. This was a most fortunate incident and assisted Warden in his deception.

"What are you screaming for? Did you finish your work? Is he dead!"

"One question at a time," said Robert, striving to imitate the husky tones of the cripple. "I had a tough fight with him, but I fixed him. See this blade? his life's blood drips from it!"

An expression of delight escaped from the masked figure's lips as he obtained an imperfect glimpse of the stained dagger and the huddled mass of humanity upon the floor. The strange echo of the vault-like chamber aided Robert's voice and the mask did not for a moment suspect that it was not his emissary who now stood conversing with him.

"Well, if you've settled him, come along;

I'll give you what I promised. Where's your lantern?"

"Smashed it up in the fight."

"That's too bad! Mine is nearly out; but come along; while the light holds a spark we must make good use of it. Shut the door after you and bolt it. I say, Matt; did you search his pockets?" asked the mask, suddenly halting and facing the supposed hunchback.

"Indeed I did, captain; did you think I'd let such a bird go unplucked? No, sir! I've got all the papers and money that he had in his pockets."

"Keep the money, but I want all the letters and papers, do you hear?"

"Yes, captain; you can have 'em."

"Confound this lantern! There's no oil in it, and it won't last until we're out of the passage," and the masked person groped along in the ghostly light, cursing the lantern and stumbling over the *debris* that littered the path.

A few fitful sputters and the lantern died out; the two men—the two who were henceforth to be bitter foes—were alone in the deep gloom of the passageway.

"Curse this darkness!" growled the mask, as he again stumbled over some obstacle in his path. "Keep close behind me, Matt; I know the way better than you do. We are now almost under Redmond's gambling-rooms. Come along; a few yards further, and we'll reach the stairway."

The masked ruffian had unwittingly given the information most needed by the young man at his heels, and Warden began to realize his present whereabouts. The wound he had received still pained him, and his head ached terribly from its effects. The loss of blood and the rapid but terrific struggle in the cellar had weakened him considerably, and it was only by a supreme effort that he trudged along, stooped over and muffled up, keeping close at the heels of the man who had registered a solemn oath to remove him.

Had the mask but known.

At length a faint streak of light issued from a point some dozen yards above the level of the passageway. The ruffian paused and began searching in his pockets,

"Not even a match," he said, in a tone of disappointment; "but, no matter; here's the stairway. See, there's the trap-door."

Robert glanced upward, and saw that the subdued light came through the cracks in the floor above, and that a flight of steps led upward toward the spot. At the head of this series of rough steps was the trap-door.

"Now, Matt, you're strong as an ox," said the villain. "You go up and raise the trap, and then hold it until I pass out."

Robert's heart gave a throb of joy, for the

ruffian had almost paved the way for an easy escape. Even as he ascended the steps his confidence vanished, for he surmised that in the room above were the companions of the desperado, who aided by the strong light of the kerosene lamps, would easily detect the trick and prevent escape.

However, it was the only chance; he ascended the steps and pushed the heavy trap-door upward.

Slowly it yielded to the desperate efforts of the young man and he obtained a view of the room thus revealed to his gaze.

A lamp was burning upon a rough table but not a living soul was visible although the low murmur of voices came from an adjoining apartment.

Robert sprung nimbly up the few remaining steps and stood in the room. The masked ruffian was just half-way up the stairs when Robert allowed the heavy trap-door to fall down again and he leaped upon it to prevent the man underneath from raising it. He glanced about quickly to discover an outlet from the room. The noise of the falling trap evidently had reached the ears of the men in the next room, for Robert heard them approach the wall and a moment later a secret door opened in the side of the room and several whiskered individuals appeared in the opening.

"The trap slipped out of my hands and darn me if I can raise it again," explained Robert in a whining tone making an effort to raise the heavy door but in reality standing upon the planks.

"Who's under there, the captain?"

"Yes," replied the supposed hunchback.

"Get out of the way there; let's get hold of the door," said the oldest of the men as they advanced toward the spot. The speaker grasped the cripple roughly and hurled him toward the table. Robert improved this unlooked-for incident by falling heavily against the table and dashing the lamp to the floor. The room was instantly enveloped in darkness, the lamp breaking in such a manner that it was extinguished immediately.

A chorus of oaths broke from the men in the room and Robert glided toward the secret door. From beneath the heavy trap-door came a subdued shout and the masked ruffian's words came distinctly to his comrade's ears.

"Seize that impostor! Don't allow him to leave the room!"

The ruffians turned swiftly and dashed toward the secret opening, but it was closed, and they rained heavy blows upon the frail barrier.

Meanwhile Robert had gained the adjacent room and closed the spring door, thus momentarily checking his pursuers. He fled

through another door and found himself in a narrow corridor. Scarcely knowing in what direction he ran, he suddenly found himself almost blinded by the stream of daylight that confronted him. He was upon a side street, and a dozen yards away he saw the main street and throngs of miners and teamsters moving in all directions.

He had escaped from the underground den, but an enemy was soon to trail him with all the venom of the viper and the cruel instinct of the bloodhound.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the events related in the opening chapters.

The excitement following the attack upon the coach and the murder of the driver had almost died out. Although the sheriff offered a reward for the apprehension of the assassins, no clew had yet been discovered, and, like all such proclamations and rewards, nothing came of it.

The footpads and road-agents had become so bold that robbery and murder had ceased to be regarded as a sensational event.

The murdered driver was quite a favorite on the stage route, for his skill and presence of mind had often saved the treasure-box and the purses of the passengers by swiftly eluding the bandits and running the gantlet.

Loud and deep were the threats uttered against the mysterious personage known as Blue-Blazes, and it was safe to say that if the villain once fell into the clutches of the excited populace, his body would grace the limb of a tree without the semblance of a trial. The band of cut-throats under his leadership was composed of the most desperate refugees from the States—men who had plunged into every species of crime, and who feared neither man nor devil.

It was plain to be seen that the formidable league were under the command of one who exercised undisputed sway, and whose discipline was rigid even among the desperadoes forming the band. Whoever he was, Blue-Blazes was credited with being a man whose word was law and whose reckless exploits had gathered about him the worst elements of the border ruffian specimens.

The very appearance of the blue rocket shooting upward into the murky sky struck terror to the occupants of the coach, or to the horseman riding through the rocky gorges and ravines.

It was certain, also, that Blue-Blazes took advantage of the notorious reputation attached to his name, for the band became bolder and the robberies more frequent.

The home of Spencer Gibson, on the outskirts of Boise City, was a neat frame dwelling, picturesquely situated on the hillside, about twenty rods from the road. Gibson had speculated in mining stocks, at times profitably and again losing considerably.

His only child, Elsie, was a beautiful maiden of scarcely seventeen. Her golden hair rippled down almost to her waist, and her features were of almost faultless beauty and the expression of rare sweetness.

Gibson sat in the little room used both as a library and place to transact business. His face wore a sad expression and traces of recent tears were still upon his furrowed cheeks. He still held the pen in his hand and a sigh escaped his lips as he glanced over the column of figures that he had traced upon the sheet of paper lying upon the desk.

"Nothing can save me from ruin unless more time is granted to me."

The words were uttered in a voice trembling with emotion, and for a moment he remained gazing upon the figures.

"All that I have toiled for—all that I have planned and cherished is about to vanish, and my darling will be without a home, without even a roof to shelter her! Oh! cursed fate that led me to speculate so wildly! I should have payed the first mortgage easily, if that villain had not robbed me. Everything seems to be against me, and nothing bright greets my anxious gaze. How did the highwayman know that the sum of money lay concealed within the false sole of my boot? Surely I spoke of it to no one. How could the footpad know it was concealed there? He called me by name, too! Yet not a living soul knew of my intentions. Stay! I believe I told Frederick Payson of my intentions—"

The door opened and a young man entered the room, hat in hand, and he paused as he observed the old gentleman seated before the desk. The man was neatly attired and a long black mustache shaded the upper lip. His face was sallow and rather thin. It is needless to say that this person was the same individual whom we noticed in company with the wretched woman who was earnestly pleading with him and who finally fell a corpse at his feet.

A smile rested upon his thin lips as he saw the older man turn to observe his entrance and he extended his hand.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Payson; be seated," and Gibson placed a chair for his visitor, who seated himself close to the desk.

"You have called perhaps to arrange our affairs," Gibson went on, "but an unlooked-for occurrence has prevented a settlement and I must appeal to your generosity. I

did have the amount ready to place in your hands, but unfortunately I have been robbed!"

"Robbed!" echoed Payson, elevating his eyebrows and gazing calmly into the features of the old gentleman.

"Robbed!" he repeated, "by whom?"

"By the scoundrel known as Blue-Blazes!"

"Indeed! may I ask how?"

"I was returning to Boise City after negotiating a loan to pay you the amount promised, when the notorious rascal stopped the coach and plundered all of the passengers, and took from me the amount I had concealed."

"Ah! then you had concealed the amount," said Payson, innocently.

"Yes, and the most curious part of the affair is that the robber called me by name and even requested me to produce the notes from their hiding-place. Now, sir, how was it possible for the ruffian to know my name and the secret place I had selected?"

"Ah! that is somewhat surprising; but then, you know this fellow, Blue-Blazes, would be sure to know your name, for you are so well known. I see nothing strange in that," replied Payson, confidently.

"But, sir, how did he know where I had concealed the notes?"

"Very true! That is strange!"

"Not a soul knew of this intention, sir—not a soul—but you!"

"Me?" cried Payson nervously, starting from his chair.

"Yes, sir; I remember telling you, and if I am not very much mistaken you suggested the idea yourself!"

"Ah! yes; I remember now; but, might it not be possible that we have been the victims of an eavesdropper? You forget, sir, that the rascal known as Blue-Blazes has emissaries everywhere. Perhaps under your very roof—"

"I will not believe that," said Gibson with an impatient gesture. "I trust my servant, Patrick Moriarity, because I know him to be an honest fellow."

"But he might have listened and repeated the words he overheard?"

"Stop, sir; not another word against the honest fellow. I have known him too long to even doubt his loyalty. The treacherous information did not come from that quarter."

In a moment Payson had leaped to his feet, his sallow face flushed, and his eyes gleaming like those of a cat in the gloom.

"Am I to infer that I am responsible for the loss you have suffered by repeating what you confided as a secret?"

Gibson met the glances of the excited man calmly, and he fixed his eyes upon those of his visitor.

"Did I accuse you?" asked Gibson, calmly.

Payson checked himself and instantly his manner changed. All traces of anger vanished, and a smile played upon his lip as he again seated himself.

"Excuse me for displaying my feelings," said he. "I misunderstood you and labored under the impression that you suspected me of complicity—or—or—"

Payson hesitated and inwardly cursed his stupidity for allowing his tongue to utter words that betrayed what was really uppermost in his mind at that moment.

"Let the matter rest," he added. "I am truly sorry you have met with such a loss for you can ill afford it at such a time. You know, sir, that the time allowed is past and the notes are due."

"Yes; it is that mortgage that now troubles me. I must ask you for an extension of time. I will sell some shares in the mine and pay you as soon as possible."

"I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Gibson, that your note is not in my keeping. I transferred it to a friend for a certain amount, and I am pained to say that he demands a settlement and will not listen to anything looking to delay. This is sorry business, but I did not dream it would come to such a pass."

Payson tried to look as if he meant the words he uttered, and he secretly rejoiced to see the expression of sorrow that swept over the old gentleman's features.

"Then, sir, let your friend do his worst. I can meet ruin. I care not for myself, but my darling child—my beautiful Elsie—she will suffer."

"For her sake I will make you an offer, Mr. Gibson," said Payson, quickly. "You know that of late I have been a visitor to your house, and Elsie has been the magnet that drew me hither. I am well off in my share of the world's goods, for fortune has smiled upon me. I love your daughter, and if you will consent to our union I will assume these debts and you are again a free man. What do you say, sir? Refuse, and the mortgage is foreclosed; consent, and I'll stay the hand of your creditors!"

Payson leaned forward, anxiously awaiting the reply.

Gibson stared hard at his visitor, and after a slight pause he spoke:

"Frederick Payson, your intentions may be honorable, but I am sorry to say that Elsie can never be your wife. My daughter's hand could not be the price of my wild speculations, even though she consented to such an alliance; but such a thing is next to impossible, because she loves another, and I will never step in between her and the man of her choice. Robert is an old schoolmate,

and they were children together. He comes to these regions to toil for his future bride, and he is even now seated beside her in the next apartment."

Payson's face betrayed no surprise—no disappointment; but, in the blandest tones possible, he responded:

"Will you please introduce me to the fortunate gentleman who has gained the love of your beautiful daughter?"

Gibson strode toward a door, and opening it, exclaimed:

"Robert, will you please step into this room for a few moments? Excuse yourself to Elsie; I won't detain you very long."

A moment later and Robert Warden entered the room, and the two young men gazed at each other.

The moment that Warden's eyes rested upon Payson's face he started back nervously, and Payson's features changed to a sickly ashen hue.

Warden knew the face the moment that his eyes rested upon it. He could not forget those features, even though he tried. Gibson failed to note the actions of the two young men, but merely introduced them:

"Mr. Payson, this is my young friend, Robert Warden."

And the two grasped hands.

Robert had at last met the man whom he had seen on the night of the woman's death!

Even as Payson extended his hand, Robert's quick glance observed the curious ring that the former wore upon the little finger of the right hand. It was an opal, exactly like that worn by the masked person who had visited him in the underground den! Was he grasping the hand of the man who had sought to destroy him, or was he mistaken about the face and the ring? These thoughts presented themselves to Robert's mind as he held Payson's hand within his own.

CHAPTER VI.

PAYSON TRIES A NOVEL GAME.

It was strange to behold the remarkable composure of the villain as he met the gaze of his rival. He greeted him cordially and for a moment Robert was thrown completely off his guard. Strange that Gibson should associate with such a person! thought Warden as he sat opposite Payson, and although he felt certain that he was the person who had caused the death of the poor girl yet he could not account for the ring. Certainly the voice was not that of the ruffian who had sent the hunchback upon his errand of murder.

Finally, Robert could not refrain from asking the question that arose to his lips a dozen

times while chatting with the man seated near him, and he carelessly said:

"That is a strange ring, Mr. Payson, it glitters like a ball of fire."

Payson's hand was withdrawn rapidly from its position upon the desk, and with a light laugh he answered:

"Strange kind of a ring! I found it yesterday as I was proceeding homeward. I think it is an opal. I have heard that opals are considered unlucky; if that's the case I'll have to discontinue wearing it."

The wily rascal did not offer it for inspection, but removing it from his finger, he thrust it into his vest pocket, and resumed his former gayety.

"Perhaps he did find it," thought Robert, "but it is certainly strange, and the more I think over the matter the more like a mystery it appears. One thing is certain, however, and that is, that the man before me is the most remarkable actor and the most subtle villain that I have ever met with."

At length Robert arose, and after bidding Payson good-night, he passed from the room and rejoined Elsie.

"He is a very nice gentleman," said Payson, "and I am truly glad that I have met him; but now, Mr. Gibson, you know the alternative. If you exercise your influence I am sure you can gain Elsie's consent, and you will study your own welfare by acting upon my suggestion, even commanding if it is necessary. Remember, sir, there is much at stake!"

"I have considered all, and my answer is still the same; my daughter is free to act as her heart dictates, and I must suffer the consequences alone."

"Very well, sir, I give you a chance, but you have spurned it. You will hear from me again, and probably before you expect it."

Without another word Payson took his hat and strode from the house. Once outside, his manner changed instantly, and an oath broke from his lips:

"He lives! lives after all my plans for his destruction! Curse my luck, what's to be done? He is the favored man. He recognized me as Edith Gray's companion on that fatal night, there's no doubt of that; but, that's all; the rest is a mystery to him. Confound the ring! I do believe opals *are* unlucky, for it almost betrayed me. I'll never wear it again. I've no time for weak sentimentality; now I must act—and that, at once."

He had reached a secluded spot, and placing a small silver whistle to his lips he blew a single shrill blast upon it. Several forms seemed to arise from the earth itself only a

dozen yards away, and they came forward to greet Payson.

"What's up, captain?" asked the foremost.

"Sh! don't address me by any title, just now. Listen to me, boys! I have work for you to do and it will require a little acting on your part. I have just paid a visit to my lady-love and find that a rival has supplanted me in her affections. He is a new arrival in these parts and if I'm not much mistaken his visit to the Salmon river regions will be a mighty short one. I speak of the lady now; I have conceived a bold plan to win her favor, but if this plan fails I'll try another which will be sure of success. I don't want to show my hand just yet; you understand me, boys?"

"Like a book, captain! like a book!"

"My plan is this; Two of you will enter Gibson's house and watch your chances to forcibly carry off his lovely daughter. Use no violence and prevent an outcry. You, Tom Boyer—you'll watch the young upstart as he leaves the house; track him and bring me satisfactory proof that you've killed him and I'll make you a present of a hundred dollars."

"All right, Cap; I'm your oyster!" and the ruffian addressed as Tom Boyer departed upon his mission.

The remaining two listened for the villain's concluding instructions.

"When you have secured the girl make a dash for the hillside and I will be close by and rush forward and pretend to rescue her from your hands—see? I'll fire several shots at you; both of you will fall to the earth and lie apparently dead while I return to the house with the rescued maiden and receive her thanks. Once we are out of sight you can take to your heels and disappear."

"Isn't he a darling!" said the short ruffian admiringly: "no one but the captain could plan such a smart thing."

"Look out when you're shooting, Cap, that you don't pepper us in earnest," admonished the other ruffian.

"I'll be careful of that. Now go, and mind that you play your parts like born actors. Remember, I always reward merit liberally."

Payson stood for a moment, listening to the retreating footsteps of his two emissaries, and a low chuckle broke from his lips as his plan presented itself in all its shrewdness, and he slowly followed after the ruffians.

"Smart plan and it takes me to originate them!" said he.

"Devil take you and your plans, me darling; it takes Paddy Moriarity to find ye's out. As the young lady is now in danger I'll follow the thafe that's after Master Robert,

and I'll tickle his ribs wid the sole o' my boot!" and the speaker arose from a clump of bushes close at hand and glided in the direction taken by Tom Boyer.

Moriarity was a dapper little son of the Emerald Isle, and had almost grown gray in the service of the Gibson family. He had accompanied the head of the family when that personage had removed to the mining-town of Boise City, and, as Paddy had often remarked, "he'd been a mother to Miss Elsie." Moriarity was pugnacious and cunning, and was even ready to stand up and battle for the "family" that he represented. Once in a while he indulged in a few drops of "mountain dew," and it was owing to a recent potation that Moriarity found himself in the brush at the opportune moment, when Payson and his comrades were planning the assault.

Paddy was sobered in a moment, and the ruffian's words caused him to listen intently to all that was said.

Away sped the Irishman in the darkness, striving to obtain a glimpse of the outlaw Boyer, or to intercept him.

But he was doomed to disappointment. He listened in vain for the villain's footsteps. Everything was still as death.

"Begorra, is it possible that I've come the wrong way?" he muttered. He took another step forward and he fell forward upon his face.

"Somebody tripped me up," he cried; but, before he could arise, he felt the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed to his temple and a voice hissed in his ear.

"Not a word or you're a dead man!"

Before Moriarity could make the slightest resistance a rope was thrown about him and his arms were pinioned firmly.

"This is what comes of me drinking the dirty stuff. If I hadn't touched the potheen I'd have a clear head wid me, and not be tied up like a chicken for the oven. Serves me right; but, mind yees, if I git the hands o' me loose, I'll lay you a five-dollar bill that some o' yees'll have a headache whin yees wake up."

Moriarity cursed his short-sightedness and heaped maledictions upon the heads of his unseen captors, for it was too dark to enable him to distinguish their features.

While the ruffians are thus bearing away the irate son of Erin we will follow the brace of cut-throats delegated to abduct Elsie.

The two approached the house, and for a short time prowled in the vicinity, intently watching the window where the young lady appeared at intervals.

While they were waiting a favorable opportunity they saw Warden depart from the house and disappear in the direction of the

road. To their great joy they saw Elsie pause upon the portico of the building.

Like a pair of serpents they glided toward her, keeping well in the shadows until, by a concerted movement, they sprung forward and seizing the unsuspecting girl, bore her quickly away.

When they had reached a point about twenty yards from the house Elsie uttered a piercing scream and made a frantic movement to escape from the rough hands that held her.

Before the scream had died away a hurried footfall sounded close at hand and a form dashed upon the scene.

Several rapid blows were launched right and left, and the two outlaws went reeling to the earth, while Elsie was clasped to a manly breast with one arm, while the other directed a hand that wielded a deadly weapon. Crack! crack! Two whip-like reports and a spiteful flash of fire followed the explosions. One ruffian fell with a bullet lodged in his brain, and the other limped away with a shattered arm.

"Elsie, my darling, look up! You are safe."

"Yes, Robert!" replied Elsie, returning her lover's embrace.

"Nice trick Payson played on us," growled the wounded villain, as he staggered away.

CHAPTER VII.

MORIARITY CAGES HIMSELF.

THE party of marauders who had captured the Irishman proceeded in the direction of the lower range of mountains.

Even if enough light had enabled Moriarity to see his captors he would have failed to discover their identity, because heavy crape masks entirely concealed their features.

They paid no attention to Paddy's remarks, but compelled him to trudge onward until the group halted in a secluded spot and each man proceeded to select his horse from a number of animals picketed in the canyon. The bandits were soon in the saddle, and Moriarity found himself on the back of a vicious mule.

In order to secure the Irishman, the outlaws had fastened his legs in such a manner that both heels were tied beneath the mule's body. This compelled Moriarity to balance himself in a ludicrous manner in order to remain seated upright.

He swayed to and fro like a tall weed, and whenever the mule descended a steep declivity the Irishman would lurch forward upon the animal's neck, and the next move he would probably be hurled, without any ceremony, upon the mule's back.

"Begorra, I'm getting sea-sick," he muttered. "How the devil am I to kape my fate whin the baste rolls around like a top? I niver saw such a fool of a horse in all my life. Hould on there!"

A sudden jolt had flung him forward upon the mule's neck and his arms remaining pinioned he had to make desperate efforts to regain his position.

"Bad luck to me!—Tie the hands of me loose, will yees?"

Of course Pat's miseries and comical antics amused the ruffians, who, aided by the faint streaks of the coming day were enabled to see the gyrations and frantic efforts of the Irishman plunging to and fro. The bandits actually led the way down steep places in order to see Pat's amusing maneuvers.

"Fhwat do they take me for—a circusrider or a jump-jack?" cried he, and he followed up the exclamation by a torrent of abuse distributed among the grinning bandits.

Pat's tormentors actually worried the mule in order to see the animal endeavor to fling the Irishman from its back.

"Arrah, if I could only be off o' this craythur's back for a moment I'd show yees what it is to t'ase an Irishman this way! Bad luck to yees! Ye're half white and half nagurs! Fhwat a curious tribe yees are. Hold on there, you wid the big hat! I saw you tickling the craythur so that it would kick up its heels. Bad luck to your ugly mug. I'd make *you* kick up your heels if I had the hands o' me onto a stout club at this blessed minute!"

Pat received no reply to his questions, nor did his threats have any effect upon the brutal crowd that rode along, urging the mule forward and jeering Pat's vain efforts to retain a steady position.

"Mark my words, I'll make some o' yees pay for the laugh that ye'r' having at my expense!"

The cavalcade finally paused upon the very brink of a deep precipice. Huge rocks arose upon all sides, seeming like the parapets, bastions and towers of a huge castle or medieval fortress. Upon the opposite side of the yawning abyss the rocks arose like a huge wall, to the hight of some seventy feet.

Beyond this barrier the mountains spread away in all directions until they seemed to meet the dull sky, now faintly reflecting the orb of day.

The group of bandits dismounted and one of their number blew a peculiar call upon a whistle.

Instantly a dull sound proceeded from the direction of the wall of rocks and a large oblong piece began to move outward toward the chasm until it completely bridged the

abyss. The drawbridge moved in exactly the same manner as an ancient drawbridge, rather the portcullis of an old castle. It formed a safe crossing over the deep abyss and the outlaws and their prisoners traversed the structure.

As soon as the cavalcade had entered the gloomy portals of the strange retreat the portcullis swung back into its place again.

"Be gob, am I among the fairies, or am I dr'aming? Maybe the devil's imps have carried me away and it's to the warm place they're taking me now," said Moriarity, as he saw the strange proceedings and the still stranger place into which he was conveyed.

The bridge moved back into its place, fitting as snug as a panel in the wall of a chamber. The cunning workmanship was now easily to be seen although at first it would have been next to impossible to detect the trick from the opposite side of the chasm. The bridge was formed of stout beams and planks. The outer surface, facing the precipice, was covered with huge irregular blocks of wood and these had been painted to resembled the rocks. So faithfully had the painter done his work that the illusion was perfect and the entire surface seemed to be a barrier of solid stone.

A vaulted archway led into the very heart of the mountain, and then opened into a series of honeycombed chambers. Into one of the wide passages the horses were led by one of the ruffians; then Patrick's limbs were released, and he was rudely dismounted from the back of the restless mule.

"Much obliged to yees," said he in a loud voice, but he quickly added in a lower tone—"may the old boy fly away wid the crowd of yees!"

His limbs were so numbed by the ropes used in securing them that he could scarcely stand erect or move them.

"Be gob, is it paralyzed I am?" he whined. "I can't even move me big toe. Ah, thin, it's a fine scrape I'm in. I'm tuk prisoner by the speerits, and they've paralyzed me entirely. Och, worra! worra! this is what I get for jist taking a sup of the poteen! Patrick Moriarity, if yees don't sign the temperance pledge after this, ye'r' no man av yer word. Where am I? I don't see the lake of fire yet."

Moriarity looked around, half-afraid that he would see the terrible flames of the infernal regions bursting out of the dark passages. "Maybe they'll put me into the small furnace first. I'm not a wicked man, anyway, and the devil's no gingleton if he puts me into the big fire widout first axing me consint!"

Pat's remarks were cut short at this junc-

ture, because a tall form emerged from the gloomy passage and approached the group.

"There he is!" muttered Pat; "here's the boss, and he'll put the Moriarity family into a hot place."

"Hello, boys! who's this?" demanded the new-comer.

"An Irishman that run across our path and we scooped him in. He may give an account of himself to the captain when he returns," and the burly ruffian turned on his heel and entered one of the passages, motioning Pat to follow.

Moriarity followed through the several intricate passages, murmuring a few short prayers as he proceeded.

"There, now!" said he, with a sigh of relief. "I'm not afeerd of the whole crowd o' whelps—not even the boss devil himself. Troth and how could I fergit meself in the first place that I didn't offer up a prayer to St. Michael?"

The masked conductor paused in a large, rocky chamber, and turned to the prisoner.

"Here's your quarters for the present," he announced, "and when the captain arrives he'll find out all about you!"

"He'll find out but very little about me, yez may be sure o' that," stoutly averred Pat, beginning to understand that he was not yet in the hands of spirits, nor in the infernal regions. His courage returned instantly and his tongue wagged incessantly.

The bandit departed and Moriarity was left alone in the chamber.

"They didn't tie me hands," he said, gaily, "and be jabers! I'm going to make a bee line for the front door."

Pat began to put his resolution into immediate execution, for he passed out of the room into the passage and there he was soon bewildered by the numerous dark aisles that greeted his gaze. Now and then he saw a distant swinging lamp, or heard the murmur of voices, but, in attempting to shun these he strayed into different tunnels until he paused and realized he was lost.

"There's a nice crowd—not to give a man a map o' this place. Now how am I to find me way out? It won't do to walk out before them, beca'se they may have objections to my departure. I want to take Frinch l'ave, if I can, unbeknownst to them."

He again started forward and as he turned a sharp angle in the dark passage he collided with some one coming in the opposite direction. The person, whoever it was, gasped for breath and staggered backward.

"I've knocked the wind out o' some one!" ejaculated Moriarity, as he sped away from the spot. He could hear the hurried tramp of his pursuer and the angry shouts of the bandit as he ordered the fugitive to halt.

Pat dashed into a room and by aid of the swinging lamp in the apartment, he saw a large chest in one corner of the chamber. With the agility of a squirrel he leaped into the chest and slammed down the heavy lid. It fell with a peculiar sound, and closed with a dull click.

The next moment several men dashed into the chamber and began an eager search for the Irishman.

"Be gob! if they open the chist, I'm cotched, so I am!" thought Moriarity, as he crouched in his narrow hiding-place. One of the ruffians actually tried to raise the lid of the chest.

"Nothing in that but the captain's weapons, and he always keeps it locked," declared a gruff voice. "I'll bet the fellow ran in the next room."

The ruffians passed out of the chamber and their voices died away in the tunnel. Moriarity tried to raise the lid of the chest, but he could not move it an inch. *It was locked*, and the Irishman was imprisoned in the iron-bound box—entombed in the chest.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE BANDITS' LAIR.

IT will be remembered that Robert arrived at the critical moment, and discomfited the two ruffians engaged in the abduction of Elsie Gibson.

One of the bandits lay stark upon the damp earth, and the other crept away with a shattered limb.

Elsie laid her head passively upon the bosom of her lover, and felt perfectly safe while nestling within his strong arms.

"Do not fear! Look up; you are safe, my darling," said Robert, and he led his beautiful companion toward the house.

Mr. Gibson was standing nervously upon the veranda as the pair approached. The report of fire-arms had alarmed him, and he reached the front door in time to behold the thrilling finale to the encounter. Before Robert could ascend the steps, or ere Gibson could question the young man, a hurried footfall startled the group, and a form dashed breathlessly to the spot.

It was Payson, and his manner was somewhat excited, although his voice betrayed no emotion whatever.

"I heard a pistol-shot proceeding from this direction," said he, "and fearing some harm to my friends, I hastened back again to aid you if necessary. What has happened? No harm to Miss Elsie, I trust?"

Payson came eagerly forward and appeared so anxious concerning the safety of the young lady that Robert at once related the adventure.

"And who were the rascals that dared to lay violent hands upon a helpless woman?" he demanded.

"I do not know who they were!" replied Robert. "I could not see them plainly, nor did I wait. I dashed upon them without any ceremony."

"Indeed!" muttered Payson, between his clinched teeth while a fiendish glitter shone in his eyes for a second. "I'll settle with you in good season, never fear;" and then, in a loud tone, he exclaimed, almost joyfully: "I'm glad you taught the rascals a lesson—they can remember."

"One of them will never do any more mischief," suggested Robert.

"Why?" asked Payson, quickly.

"Because, there is an ounce of lead in his body, and I believe it touched a vital spot," replied Robert, carelessly.

Payson ground his teeth with rage, and his breath came in short gasps. If Warden could have seen the villain's face at that moment he would have started back with surprise. It was an evil, malignant look that so transformed his features that he looked like another being. It was as if a mask had been suddenly placed upon his countenance—a mask such as the old masters painted upon their canvas to depict the arch-fiend. But the consummate scoundrel quickly overcame his passion, and the next moment his face wore a smiling appearance and his words were pleasant.

"It's lucky I did not arrive in time," said he, "lucky for the other villain I mean, for I would have sent him to keep company with his confederate. But I am pleased to see you are safe and no harm done to either of you. So I will resume my journey to the hotel. Are you going my way, Mr. Warden?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," replied the young man; "at least, not at present."

Something prompted Robert to his decision and something like the hiss of a serpent escaped the lips of Payson as he turned upon his heel, with a hasty good-night to the group.

The villain strode away in the dark and was soon in the friendly recesses of the deep gloom. Here he paused and shook his fist toward the party standing upon the veranda.

"This will be a bad night's work for you, Robert Warden. You have crossed my path, and it is now too late to allow you the least chance of escape. Nothing but your life will atone for the wrong you have done me. Let me see, the whelp spoke of having shot one of my men, dead! I wonder who it was? Oh! bitterly will he rue this interference! I'll put him to the torture as the wild Indian tortures his captive; laugh at his shrieks of

pain; scoff at his entreaties to be merciful. I must invent some horrible torture."

"Captain!" said a voice, proceeding from the tangled underbrush.

"Who's there?" demanded Payson, turning toward the point in question.

"Me, captain," and the speaker came forward with his arm hanging limp and bleeding. It was the outlaw—the survivor of the twain sent by Payson to abduct Elsie.

"That was a mean trick, Cap! I've got a bullet in my arm and Russell lies out yonder with his toes turned up. He'll never do any more business on the road. He's a goner! But, I didn't think you would play us a trick like that, captain."

"My dear fellow, you are mistaken; I am just as much grieved over it as you are. It was not I that came forward and fired the shots but a contemptible sneak whom I'll kill by inches when I get him into my hands. I was tricked as much as any of you. I am extremely sorry for you, and for poor Russell, and you take my word for it we will have a vengeance that will amply repay us for all our disappointment and suffering. My plan was a good one but it missed fire!"

"I wish the confounded pistol had missed fire!" growled the wounded bandit with a groan of pain. "If we had known that it was a stranger that was rescuing the girl we could have dropped him easily but we thought it was you, and we didn't make any resistance or show fight. Just let me get my peepers on the feller that broke my arm and I'll bet he'll pay dear for it. You hear me a-shouting!"

Instead of the "shout" the ruffian uttered a low groan of pain.

"There is a still deeper vengeance that will track him and he is a doomed man," protested Payson. "The vengeance is that of one who never fails—the vengeance of Blue-Blazes!"

"Correct, captain! Blue-Blazes is the word, and the fellow is just as good as dead!"

"But, I'd rather *know* he was there," thought Payson, as the wounded bandit's sanguine expression fell upon his ears.

"What's to be done, Cap?"

"Follow me, the man we're after is still in that house, and maybe Tom Boyer will nail him as he leaves it and he will need help. Come along."

Payson led the way and his wounded companion followed.

The villain led the way toward the road, and as he neared it he became cautious. He had scarcely reached the broad trail when the click of a weapon fell upon his ears and instantly he gave vent to a low sound—a peculiar signal, that was answered immediately. From the mass of wild vines and jagged

rocks came the ambushed assassin, Tom Boyer, and the three villains were soon engaged in a low but hurried conversation,

"Sh! I hear the sound of a footstep! He's coming! To cover at once."

Like phantoms, the rascals glided to their hiding-places, and eagerly awaited the coming of their victim. Nearer and nearer approached the person in question, until a shadowy form passed the spot where Payson and his murderous comrades lay concealed. Then, like spirits they crept down the hill-side and followed Robert Warden, and before the young man could turn he was felled to the earth and Payson peered into the face of the prostrate man while he pressed the muzzle of a revolver close to Warden's temple and uttered a blasphemous expression of triumph.

"Not a word, you hell-hound, or I'll let daylight into your skull," he said, huskily.

"What, is it you, Mr. Payson?" said Warden, in tones of amazement.

"Yes! Further concealment is useless. I am your most bitter foe and your life will answer for the blood you have shed to-night! Bind him, lads, and keep an eye upon him. The least effort he makes to evade us send a bullet into his brain. Come, be lively!"

The two ruffians secured Robert's hands with a stout strap and allowed him to stand upright.

"One question, please," said Robert, turning to Payson, but the rascal's face wore a terrible expression.

"Not a word! Dare to speak until I address you, and I'll have short work made of you. Forward now, and with our horses we must reach the rendezvous before daylight."

Robert saw that it would be useless to resist or even bandy words with the ruffian and his comrades, so he went forward quietly. He blamed himself for his want of caution, and his surprise was great when he discovered that Payson was the instigator of the abduction and in league with the ruffians whom he had defeated. An hour later saw the party all mounted on swift horses and dashing toward the mountain den of the robber league. They passed over the curious bridge and entered the portals of the stronghold. Robert was in the robbers' lair and in the hands of a deadly foe.

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW FOE BEGINS.

THE streets of Rocky Bar presented a lively appearance on the evening following the incidents related in the preceding chapters. The wide street was thronged with groups of excited men, armed with the inevitable revolver—men whose faces wore a determined look, and whose fingers toyed nervously with

the triggers of their weapons. In fact, the whole scene presented the appearance of a battle-field after the sulphurous smoke has been wafted aside by the wind. It was indeed a calm after the storm—a lull after the tempest. A terrible conflict had raged in the streets of the mining town, and the deadly pistol had cracked in all quarters of Rocky Bar. Dead bodies lay upon the floors of the drinking saloons, and wounded men wandered to and fro with pale features and blood-stained bandages.

Red-shirted miners and staid residents of the rough town had banded together and finally pounced down upon the desperate characters infesting and ruling the town.

The threatened blow had fallen; the storm-cloud had burst; in other words, the miners had "cleaned out" the gamblers and desperadoes.

As the repeated warnings failed to effect a reform, the pistol was called in to settle the question. A fearful conflict ensued, but the gamblers and bullies melted away like snow beneath the warm sun, and the evil characters were either sleeping the last sleep or skulking away in the mountain defiles or in safer hiding-places.

Border vengeance is rapid and complete, and never is reform accomplished so thoroughly as when the outraged community rises and asserts its power, and deals out summary justice to those who have defied and trodden all laws under their feet.

Such a scene had occurred in Rocky Bar. The Vigilantes, organized under the title of the "Break-o'-day Boys," swept down on the unsuspecting rascals, and a short but bloody encounter took place. Not until the last gambler and bully had fled was quiet restored; then the groups upon the street congratulated themselves that Rocky Bar was purged of evil-doers.

One brave man—one brave spirit had formed the league, and led it on to victory. This person had arrived in Rocky Bar but a few weeks previous, and in that time he had organized his party of reform, and completely crushed out the vipers that overran the little town.

Herbert Gray was a tall, middle-aged man whose premature gray hairs and careworn features would have led an observer to estimate his age much beyond his years. Some secret sorrow bowed him down and left its traces upon his face. The desperadoes seemed to be the object of his hatred, for he was uncompromising in his views, and nothing short of a complete extermination would satisfy him.

The remnant of the ruffian element prowled in the mountain recesses and shunned Rocky Bar, seeking more congenial neighborhoods.

The name of the order became suddenly famous in a day, and carried dismay into the ranks of the blackleg fraternity.

It was toward sunset that a horseman neared the elevated plateau overlooking the mining-town, and reined in his steed. It was Payson, and a troubled look rested upon his countenance.

"It is folly to remain away from my old haunts," said he. "It is almost two weeks since I visited Rocky Bar, and most of my old comrades will think I have abandoned them. The fact is that, to remain solid with the men of influence in this town, I must mingle with them. My love affairs have prevented me from visiting this place, although I should have done so immediately after the coach affair. I don't want to be suspected, because I want full entree to the society of both Boise City and Rocky Bar; once that is denied to me, I'll have to stick to the mountains like a wild beast. That would not suit me. I must play the gentleman and avoid all suspicious company. I have secured Mister Warden, and left him in the hands of responsible persons who will attend to him. Ha! ha! ha! Hello!"

The exclamation was caused by the sudden appearance of a form that emerged from the tall bushes skirting the mountain trail.

Payson's hand was seeking a weapon, when the new-comer's voice reassured him.

"It's only me, Cap," said the blood-stained pedestrian, drawing nearer. "I'm in a bad fix, and I've got to tramp a long ways."

"What's the matter?"

"There's been a deuce of a time down at the Bar."

"A scrape among yourselves?"

"No; we're 'cleaned out.'"

"How? Explain; I don't quite understand you."

"The miners have banded themselves together, and they swooped down on us and gave us a scorcher."

"Do you mean to say there has been a conflict, and that the boys are driven out of Rocky Bar?"

"Correct, captain; that's the meaning I wish to convey. We're scattered like chaff. We're all either wounded or caved in. I never saw such a clean sweep in all my life. I've been in hot scrapes, but this beats 'em all. Our race is run in that town, and it ain't healthy, you bet."

Payson inwardly cursed himself for having absented himself from the Bar, for he felt certain that he could have avoided the catastrophe to his friends, or, rather, warned them. The blow struck in Rocky Bar was a direct blow at his infamous league, and the villain knew it. His lips turned purple,

and his eyes gleamed like the orbs of a tiger in the dark.

"Who has done this?" he suddenly demanded.

"Some straunger. He ain't been at the Bar more than two weeks, but he did it slick. An old feller—his name is Gray. He comes from Sacramento."

A shudder swept through the frame of the ruffian as the name fell upon his ears and his face changed color.

"Gray—you say the name is Gray?" said he, anxiously.

"Yes, that's the name," replied the wounded gambler.

"Her father!" murmured Payson, in a hoarse whisper. "What brings him to these regions? Does he come to seek for his daughter, or does he come to seek *me*?"

It was evident that the name of the Vigilante leader had alarmed Payson, for he trembled as if he had the ague, and his words were incoherent.

"Where is Neal Williams?" he asked.

"Gone under! I don't think there's many of us left," answered the other. "I tell you, Cap, the news of the coach robbery started all the fuss. Neal Williams came into town, and he allowed the 'fluid' to get the best of him, and he blabbed his business right out, and gave the whole thing away."

"Confound the idiot! good thing he's dead!"

"He was one of the first keeled over. We had a hot skirmish to even get out of town," said the wounded man.

"Would you advise me to venture into town?" asked Payson, quietly.

"Not by a darned sight, Cap!"

"Why not? What do they know about me?"

"I wouldn't go if I was you. I'll tell you Cap: they've got an idea who it is that plays himself off as Blue-Blazes. They kinder suspect who it is that sends up the blue lights and stops the coaches. Blame me if I'd stick my head into the lion's mouth. Things is bad down there, Cap; so take my advice—vamoose!"

"Do you mean to say that they suspect the identity of Blue-Blazes?"

"Well, a little that way, Cap! Neal Williams blabbed too freely, and there's no knowing what he said and what he didn't say.

Then, there was a young feller over here several days ago by the name of Robert Warden; he had a confab with this man by the name of Gray. It may be that you were not the burden of the conversation, but the person called Blue-Blazes certainly was; and now let me tell you something, Cap: This young feller pretends that he is here merely

speculating, but that's all in my eye. He's on the United States force—just appointed; I know it, because I have good reason to know it. He's a fresh detective just sent out to hunt up road-agents in the interest of the mail service. He's acquainted with Spencer Gibson and his lovely daughter, and he worked hard to get an appointment in the Territory. Now you see I'm giving it to you straight, Cap; it's gospel truth."

"Are you sure about it?"

"No doubt at all. I'm a feller that keeps posted, and I know what I'm talking about. You just manage to get your claws on this Robert Warden and scoop in old Gray, and you can break up the Vigilantes in no time, and things will be just as they need to be."

A smile of fiendish satisfaction swept over Payson's face and he exclaimed:

"I have it in my power to kill two birds with one stone!"

"Indeed! and how?" queried the gambler.

"I'll tell you. I've got this same Robert Warden safe in my headquarters, at this present minute. He has crossed my path in various ways. I did have a dozen reasons to remove him, but now I shall not rest until I can place my foot upon his dead body." Payson's voice betrayed his hate, and he turned the horse's head away from the mining town.

"Delays are dangerous, Cap. If you have the power to crack him, do so at once. Dead men tell no tales, and the lesson we received to-day should be a bitter one."

"It shall be a bitter one to our foes!" thundered the bandit. "I'll sweep down upon that town, and I'll lay it in ashes for the blow struck to-day. I'll know no rest until I destroy Robert Warden. Come! Mount behind me! You shall witness his death, and see how Blue-Blazes removes an enemy."

The gambler mounted behind the road-agent and Payson spurred the horse toward the mountain retreat—one thought uppermost in his mind, and that was the death of Robert Warden.

CHAPTER X.

"LUNG CHEE."

WHEN Robert Warden entered the rocky chambers of the outlaw league, he was led into a dim passage, opening into an apartment that seemed to be hewn out of the solid granite. He was placed in charge of several bandits who were instructed to watch the prisoner narrowly, and to prevent any conversation with the captive.

The bandit chief seeking his own chamber, cast himself upon a rough cot. "I've got him caged at last," he said, gleefully, and my way is clear. I'll call upon Spencer

Gibson and dictate my own terms. I have played the humble lover long enough; now I want a decided answer; the girl I will have!"

A figure at that moment, hobbled into the chamber—a short, yellow-faced Chinaman, with an immense cue coiled upon the summit of his cranium. His little eyes twinkled with pleasure and his capacious mouth exposed a set of wolfish teeth. He advanced, grinning and bowing toward the reclining bandit.

"Lung Chee glad see cap'en allee home again! Likee see cap'n home!"

"Oh! it's you, is it?" said Payson, glancing up carelessly. "Yes! I'm home again, but I'm going to take a ride over to Rocky Bar. You will have some one to look after, Lung Chee—a young lady!"

"'Mellican young ladee?"

"Certainly! You'll have to look after her and I'll pay you for it!"

Lung Chee grinned. The word money always thrilled the Chinaman's heart. He would have sold his grandmother and all his relatives into the bargain for "'Mellican silber."

"When youngee ladee comee?" he asked.

"In a day or two; I haven't made up my mind yet," replied Payson.

Lung Chee busied himself arranging the chamber and replenishing the fire. The Chinaman answered the purpose of cook and housekeeper, and was one of the most mercenary of his kind. Cunning and tricky as the fox, he was ever on the lookout to add a few dollars to his hoarded wealth, with which to return to China, there to live like a grandee.

Lung Chee was open to any bribe, and often skulked into Payson's private chest to obtain liquor for the members of the league for which the "boys" always paid liberally.

Lung Chee's idea of money was to get it at once and think about it afterward. "A bird in the hand," was his motto.

"When cap'n going 'way?" he inquired, suddenly, pausing and facing the chief.

"In an hour or two. Get me some coffee; make it strong."

Lung Chee hastened out and soon returned with a steaming cup of the beverage. Payson drank it and passed out of the room to the spot where the ruffians were guarding the narrow entrance leading into Robert's quarters.

"Keep an eye on this fellow," he ordered. "He's slippery as an eel and may give you trouble."

"I'll warrant you he does not get out of this place, Cap. If he does, he'll get lead pills into his system. Spose he did get out, he can't cross the precipice 'less the bridge is swung 'cross. There's the sticker, Cap!"

and you needn't be afraid about the bird flying away. He won't get very far afore we clip his wings," and the speaker leered viciously, while his comrade joined in with a low chuckle.

"Very well. I leave him in your care. Look after him until I return. He's on the black list, and I dare say you know what that means?"

The two sentries uttered a loud guffaw.

"It means that the buzzards'll have a jubilee," responded one of the men.

Payson now ordering his black steed brought to the main entrance, sprung into the saddle; the curious drawbridge rattled down over the gloomy abyss; the outlaw rode over the structure and waited until he saw the bridge drawn back and glide into its bed of rock.

"That's one of my inventions. It makes my stronghold a perfect Gibraltar," said he, proudly. "That rocky wall is loopholed, and with my band I can sweep the only approach to my mountain castle. But I'll have to abandon it if I win Gibson's daughter. Yes; I can leave America—a rich man."

Thus musing he rode along toward Rocky Bar, building his airy castles and forming his confident plans.

In the mean time poor Moriarity was almost half-starved in the chest and unable to raise the lid, for it was a curious lock that fastened the cover.

A few holes in the side of the chest enabled him to see the apartment and its surroundings; also afforded air to the Irishman in his close quarters. He felt in all corners of the huge chest and found but a few articles of clothing and a brace of revolvers. To his intense satisfaction he discovered that the weapons were both loaded.

"Be gorra! I have something, any ways, to protect myself," said he. "Now, if I only had a sup o' the craythur to keep me blood in circulation! There I go! bad scan to me! Didn't I say once that I'd never touch a drap again? Arrah! whisky, ye're the devil, sure enough! It was you that got me intill the trouble I'm in. Here I am locked up in a chist and sorra a one o' me knows whin I'm going to be let out! Be-dad! I have the pistils. I'll shoot the lock off the chist—so I will!"

Moriarity's soliloquy was brought to an abrupt terminus, for a person entered the rocky chamber and glanced eagerly about. It was Lung Chee.

Paddy observed the Chinaman from his peek-holes in the sides of the chest. Several times he was on the point of hailing the Celestial but he wisely held his tongue. Moriarity saw the heathen approach a closet and take a bottle from its depths. A low

gurgling sound came to Pat's ears and the aroma of whisky reached his dilated nostrils.

"Och, look at the yaller thafe!" he groaned: "he's drinking right under me very nose. Hould me somebody or I'll faint! There I go again! Didn't I say I wouldn't tech another drap? Och, look at him drinking, murder in Irish! Can I stand it? I'll die! I'll die!"

Lung Chee replaced the bottle and closed the cupboard. The Chinaman hobbled out of the room, smacking his lips while Moriarity uttered a deep groan and gasped.

"I'll bet he drank it all up! Bad luck to him—the yaller-faced baboon!"

Lung Chee making his way into the chamber where Robert was secured, approached the young man and halted before him.

"Hello—you got hands tied up alle same like prison—eh?"

"Yes. Do you belong to Payson's gang?"

"Me Lung Chee; me workee Mistee Payson. Why you gottee hands tied?"

"I don't know. You say your name is Lung Chee?"

"Yes; Lung Chee!"

"Lung Chee, you look like a good fellow. I dare say you expect to go back to China some day?"

Robert saw that the mere mention of the Flowery Kingdom had started the Chinaman.

"Yes! Me go back China country, some day. Lung Chee poor man alle same, got to savee money to ride in big ship back to Canton!"

"Lung Chee, how would you like to earn a hundred dollars?"

"Gollee! 'Sh! don't speakee 'loud; 'Mellican man outside hear you talkee Lung Chee. You give Chinaman hundred dollee?" said the rapacious heathen.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars if you help me to escape. A hundred dollars is a great deal of money to you, and you can easily help me out of this place."

"How I can helpee you?" said Lung Chee, apparently to himself, and he quickly added: "When you give me hundred dollee?"

"As soon as you set me free and show me the way out of this place."

"You no foolee poor Chinaman?"

"I promise you faithfully to pay you the money just as soon as I am out of this cavern."

"All rightee! No say a word. Lung Chee can't do now! Wait by'm by when nightee; when 'Mellican man sleepee I helpee you. No forget one hundred dollee?"

Robert again assured the Celestial of the amount, and as the sentry outside drew

nearer to the chamber, Lung Chee glided away into the passage to avoid the sentinel.

"I've made a friend of the Chinaman," thought Robert. "He may aid me to elude my enemies. For the money the fellow will murder a sentinel if necessary to get me out of here."

The hours wore on, and nothing greeted the ears of the captive but the tread of the sentry or the low hum of voices in the passage.

A loud commotion at length in the passage aroused him, and a hurried footstep sounded close at hand. The next moment Payson burst into the chamber. The bandit chief had returned from Rocky Bar, and his face wore a most diabolical expression as he strode before his prisoner. Robert saw that something unusual had angered the ruffian, and his hopes of escape were dashed.

CHAPTER XI.

A HUMAN ROAST AND AN IRISH STEW.

THE bandit paused for a few moments and then in a voice hoarse with fury, he exclaimed:

"Having attended to more pressing business I have returned to settle with you. First of all let me tell you that I fling aside all concealment and boldly tell you who I am. I am the man known as Blue-Blazes, and the head and front of the band ruling the Salmon River regions."

"I am well aware of your identity," responded Robert, calmly. "I made that discovery without any information from your lips."

"The information will be of no benefit to you, because you never again leave this place. You are doomed to die in this chamber. Your moments are numbered and my vengeance will be a speedy, but a terrible one."

"Very well, sir; I can meet death as I have often faced it. I see you in your true colors. Vile hypocrite, cowardly villain, do your worst! You cannot intimidate me in the least."

"We shall see!" replied Payson with a meaning smile. "I, too, have made a discovery. You came to these regions to ferret out the mail-robbers and road-agents, didn't you? Poor, silly fool! You've put your foot into a trap!"

The road-agent cast a look of cold contempt upon his bound prisoner, and then he continued:

"You sought these wilds to again press your claims upon Spencer Gibson's daughter. Before your coming, I was her chosen suitor."

Robert's eyes flashed fire and his lips curled with scorn,

"You?" said he, contemptuously. "You? Do not couple your polluted name with that beautiful girl's. She wed with such a monster as you? Better, far better that she should seek the protection of the famished tiger!"

Payson's face grew deadly pale: Robert's words were burning into his soul as if each sentence was composed of molten lead.

At length, unable to control his passion, he raised his hand and struck the prisoner with his clinched fist.

"That's right!" said the young man; "strike an unarmed and defenseless prisoner; it is worthy of the courage of the famous Blue-Blazes. It is the heroic act of a cowardly desperado—a robber and a villain. Ay, strike again! I cannot return the blow and you are safe!"

Payson bounded backward and blew a signal upon his silver whistle. Several outlaws entered the chamber.

"Call a few more of the boys; tell them to come immediately," the outlaw chief ordered.

"I will arrange matters with you at once," said he, significantly to Warden.

In a few moments a dozen bandits stood in the chamber. A more villainous group of cut-throats would have been hard to find anywhere. They stood waiting their leader's orders.

"Take the prisoner into the next chamber!" he exclaimed.

Several desperadoes led Robert out of the room into a larger one. Payson and the remainder of the party followed in their wake.

"Now, then, one of you bring in an armful of wood and dry twigs. I think I can amuse you."

A ruffian sprung away to execute the order, while the rest stared as if asking an explanation.

"I'll tell you what to do next. Take down that swinging lamp, and pass a stout rope through the iron ring."

In a short space of time the order was obeyed by the nimble rascals.

It happened that Payson and his gang had brought their captive into the very chamber where Moriarity lay, coiled up in the chest.

The Irishman could see everything that transpired in the room, and his blood boiled when he saw that it was Robert Warden who was in the hands of the bandits, and that preparations were now under way to execute him.

Lung Chee hovered about the group, busying himself in various ways. When the rope had been adjusted through the iron ring fixed in the dome of the cavern, the ruffian sent in quest of the wood entered and placed the

combustible matter in the center of the chamber floor.

"Arrange that wood directly under the spot where the rope passes through the ring and start the fire."

A few seconds later and the huge mass of wood was crackling and blazing upon the rocky floor, sending forth tongues of flame.

"Now then, pass one end of the rope around the prisoner's ankles and secure it."

The ruffians obeyed with alacrity, and soon fastened the rope in the manner desired.

"Now then, boys, do you see through my plan? I'm going to swing him over that mass of fire, head downward; spoil his pretty curly hair and damage his beautiful face. He came here to ferret out the road-agents, and, as luck would have it, he's in our hands. What's the verdict?"

"Death!" came from every ruffian's lips.

"Begorra, they're going to roast him!" whispered Moriarity. "How the devil can I get out of the box?"

He made a desperate attempt to raise the lid, but the stout cover did not yield in the least.

"Must I stand here and see him kilt?" he whined, and his hands grasped the brace of revolvers.

"Now seize the other end of the rope and be ready to haul him up when I give the word. When I think he has suffered enough I'll send a bullet through his brain."

Payson's hand sought his belt, but his weapons were not there. He had mislaid them.

"No matter. Here, Lung Chee; you'll find my pistols in that chest. Open it and hand them to me."

Moriarity's heart stood still and he grasped his pistols firmly.

"Bedad, if the yaller nagur opens the box it's all up wid ye, Patrick Moriarity," said the Irishman, in a hurried whisper. "But, be the sowl of me great grandfather Shamus Moriarity—him as kilt five Britishers in Kilkinny—I'll have a ruction afore I'm cotched!"

Lung Chee was advancing toward the large chest and a group of ruffians had seized the end of the rope and awaited Payson's next command.

Robert stood unflinching; although he knew full well the horrible fate awaiting him, his cheek did not blanch. Payson noticed this. He had expected that his victim would beg for his life; but the scoundrel was denied the pleasure. Not a murmur came from Robert's lips.

"Do you see the manner in which you are to be launched into eternity?" Payson demanded,

"I do—and with my last breath I defy you," cried the young man.

"There is one chance left you—only one. First, I will call your attention to the flames. You are to be suspended, head downward, over the fire and lowered into it. It is a fearful death, but one which you deserve. I said I would give you a chance. It is this: Leave this territory and never return. Swear never to see Elsie Gibson again. Renounce all claim to her hand. Do this, and you are free to depart. Refuse, and you die!"

Payson stepped forward and awaited the reply.

The outlaw crew looked disappointed, and with scowling faces allowed the rope to fall to the floor.

"Then I'll die!" responded Robert. "Such liberty as you would offer me I scorn. Renounce her whom I love far better than life itself? Never! Torture me—kill me if you will; but to the last moment I will remain loyal to honor and to love."

"Curse you! Up with him, boys!" cried Payson, in a wild outburst of anger.

The bandits drew up the rope rapidly, and Robert was hurled upon his side, violently.

A second later he was suspended over the flames, head downward, swinging to and fro.

The Chinaman, advancing to the chest, had barely thrust aside the hasp of the lid, when up it flew and Moriarity leaped from the depths of the box with a brace of revolvers—one weapon aimed at the group holding the rope, the other one leveled full at Payson's head.

It was a most thrilling and unexpected incident, and each rascal stood rooted to the spot while looking toward the ominous weapons in the hands of the Irishman.

"Lower that man this instant, and be careful ye don't hurt a hair of his head, or be jabbers I'll let daylight intill yees!" shouted Moriarity. "Down wid him, ye spal-peens, or I'll pull the trigger. I've a bullet for ev'ry one o' yees, and a half a dozen for that devil's brother-in-law over there!" said he, indicating the outlaw chief.

Payson shrunk back, and the bandits instantly lowered Robert down, clear of the fire, and laid him upon the floor.

"Cut the rope there, ye yaller-faced nagur, or I'll tell the capt'in how I saw ye drinking his whisky. Cut the ropes; or by the rod of Saint Patrick, I'll give ye a bullet to chaw on."

It was lucky for Moriarity that none of the outlaws present were armed. They were wholly at the Irishman's mercy.

The Chinaman produced a clasp-knife, and quickly severed the ropes that bound Robert's arms and ankles.

"Now, thin, out of the way with yees! Foller me, Mister Robert, and be gorra we'll l'ave the place!"

Moriarity led the way toward the opening, and brandishing his weapons he stood at the entrance until Robert had disappeared.

Payson and his followers were completely paralyzed with surprise. So sudden was the appearance of the Irishman, and from such unexpected quarters, that the robber chief and his men were literally dumb with astonishment. Moriarity actually cowed them and took their prisoner out of their hands, without meeting the slightest resistance!

Payson knew the weapons were loaded, and he read determination in the eyes of the Emerald Islander. He knew that it meant death to the first man resisting, and he wisely concluded that he would not be the first victim.

But, the moment that Moriarity passed out of the chamber the spell was broken, and with a howl resembling the cry of a hyena, Payson dashed after the fugitives, followed by his yelling confederates.

"After them!" he shrieked. "They can't cross the abyss unless the bridge is down. They're caged, after all. Instead of one we'll have two."

The bandit and his followers dashed pell-mell into the low, dim passage and Payson distinctly heard the retreating footsteps of the fugitives as they sped away.

"There they go! Now we've got them! They're cornered!"

Crack! A sharp explosion rung through the passage, and the yelling outlaw directly behind Payson pitched forward and fell heavily to the earth with a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. At the same moment a distant signal came to Payson's ears.

"Curses and furies!" he shouted. "There goes the signal to lower the bridge!"

CHAPTER XII.

"THE BREAK O' DAY BOYS."

MORIARITY ran onward, scarcely knowing in what direction to find the outlet. Robert kept close beside him. Once or twice Moriarity turned and discharged his revolvers at his pursuers.

"Kape straight ahead, Misther Robert!" he cried. "Don't turn to the right nor to the left but folly yer nose and it's meself thinks we'll find the front door."

Payson's voice could be heard above the sounds of pursuit—cursing and urging his confederates onward.

Robert knew that the greatest danger lay in the vicinity of the portcullis, for several bandits guarded the entrance, night and day.

These ruffians handled the machinery to

lower the bridge, when ordered from within, or signaled from the opposite cliff. In a few moments the fugitives turned a sharp angle in the long passage and at that instant a peculiar signal came from afar. The rumbling sound of a windlass and the clanking of chains followed. Some one had hailed the "robbers' Gibraltar" from the opposite side of the chasm; some member or members of the outlaw league had signaled for admission, and the guardians of the entrance were lowering the bridge!

It was a most fortunate occurrence, and Moriarity cried:

"Come along! Did yees hear that? The bridge is being lowered. Bedad, we'll be the first to cross it!"

Another sharp turn and the two men came full upon the outlaws working the windlass, and to their great joy they observed that the bridge was almost half-way over the chasm. The noise of the chains and the machinery had drowned the sounds of pursuit, and when Robert and Moriarity suddenly sprung into view the bandit sentries failed to observe them. Nearer and nearer came Payson and his men.

The bridge descended but slowly. By the time it was swung into its place Payson would be upon the scene!

Moriarity saw all this at a glance. In a moment his revolvers were leveled at the toilers of the bridge.

"Be gob, it's our lives or theirs, and I want to live if I can," and he fired two shots in quick succession. The bandits relaxed their hold upon the windlass and the huge roller spun around with rapidity 'mid a fearful clatter of chains and pulleys.

The bridge was dashed across the chasm and it touched the opposite cliff with a tremendous shock. A moment later and the two friends were upon the structure making their way toward the cliff.

Several shadowy forms stood upon the brink of the opposite side. It was the outlaws that had challenged the keepers of the portcullis.

Even as Moriarity and Warden were midway upon the bridge, Payson and his howling pack sprung into view and filled the dark entrance of the rocky citadel.

The fugitives were, therefore, between two fires. The mounted bandits who had just arrived and were seeking admission to the retreat seemed to understand the state of affairs. In the dim light they saw the two figures crossing the bridge, and heard the confused hum of voices within the cavern. The mass of timbers falling in such an abrupt manner excited their suspicions, and immediately each horseman produced a weapon,

"Stop them! stop them!" the outlaw chief yelled. "They are prisoners escaping from us."

Several pistol-shots awoke the slumbering echoes of the locality.

Robert and Patrick had barely taken another step forward when both fell through the wooden structure and shot down into the deep gloom of the abyss.

Several planks displaced by the rude shock, caused by the rapid descent of the bridge, had left an open space and the two fugitives had unconsciously darted into the death-trap and fallen through! A low cry came up from the awful gloom of the chasm as the two men shot down into its untried depths.

A fiendish laugh broke from Payson's lips as he discovered the fate of his foes.

An outlaw hastened out upon the bridge, with a flaming torch, and the bandit chief seized it and vainly endeavored to peer down into the abyss. Everything was still and silent as the grave.

"They're mangled beyond recognition!" said he in tones of satisfaction. "No man could escape such a fall. Everything was for the best, after all. The bridge lowered by mere accident in time to allow them to step forth upon it, but it proved to be the means of sending them out of this world."

Payson's joy was complete. Both men were disposed of at one blow! Warden was a crushed mass of humanity in the rocky fastness of the chasm and never again would he cross the road-robber's path!

In a few moments several outlaws had produced some planks from the recesses of the cavern and repaired the broken timbers. The mounted bandits then crossed to safety and joined Payson and his group.

In a few words the chief explained everything to the new-comers.

"But, Cap, we've lost valuable time both in waiting to cross over and by the attempted escape of your prisoners. Do you forget that the coach from Rocky Bar is due tonight? It's a valuable haul, and if we expect to rake it in we've got to be mighty lively," said the spokesman of the mounted robbers.

"Very true," replied Payson. "I had forgotten that. We can't let that slip by us. Wells, Fargo & Co. have a case of silver ingots on that coach. We must have that bullion for it's a valuable chest. Anybody in charge of it?"

"Yes, but only a handful; we can scoop in the whole escort if we want to. It won't do to tackle the coach in the same place, will it, Cap?"

"No! we'll ride about a quarter of a mile beyond the canyon and then send up the

blue light to let them know that Blue-Blazes sends his compliments and wants them to fork over the valuables."

Payson uttered a light laugh. Now that Robert Warden was out of the way, the bandit was in the most jovial mood imaginable. He gave several orders, and prolonged signals echoed in all quarters of the mountain retreat, and the tramp of horses' hoofs sounded upon the rocky floor of the caverns.

Each outlaw donned his mask and vaulted into the saddle. A cavalcade crossed the bridge and galloped down the steep mountain toward the trail, Payson at their head.

At length he reined in his steed.

"Now, then, separate as usual. You, Gabe Sullivan, take the position to the north, and you, Tom Boyer, take up a position to the south, after the coach has passed. Take your squads with you."

Each lieutenant rode away, followed by his picked men, and Payson, with about a dozen selected ruffians, remained upon the point of rocks overlooking the deep canyon through which the stage-coach was compelled to pass in order to reach Boise City.

"Now, look out, boys! We're not a moment too soon," said Payson, in a hoarse whisper. "Listen! I hear the rumbling sound of wheels. The coach is coming. Get the blue lights ready. I guess the boys are all at their posts by this time. Dismount, everybody!"

The orders were obeyed with alacrity.

"Now come down cautiously to the trail. Wait for the signal."

The road-agents crawled down toward the road and awaited the coming of the coach.

The driver of the vehicle doubtless thought all danger past, for he was coming along at a rattling pace now that he had almost passed through the canyon without molestation.

Suddenly a streak of fire shot up into the murky shadows—a blue light that cast a glare upon the desolate regions; and then came the swift rush of the human tigers and the coach was completely surrounded. A platoon of bandits barred the road to the left while the same number cut off a retreat to the south.

But hark! What sound is that? Even as the bandit league grasp the treasure-box a cloud of horsemen gallop toward the spot, and the next moment a storm of bullets sweep through the astonished ruffians.

"Down with them, lads!" cries a stentorian voice. "Surrender, you hell-hounds, to the *Break-o'-day Boys of Rocky Bar!*"

CHAPTER XIII.

PAYSON MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

THE band of Regulators headed by Her-

bert Gray swept down upon the astonished ruffians and literally rode over them.

The crack of the pistol and the clash of steel resounded on the night air, while the oaths of the surprised bandits mingled with the shrieks and groans of the wounded.

Herbert Gray dashed into the thickest of the fray, and vainly endeavored to single out the head and front of the robber league. He cheered the "Break-o'-day Boys" onward, and rode down all who opposed him.

At the very first shot fired Payson scrambled up the side of the mountain and dashed toward the spot where the horses were picketed.

"Make for the roost!" he yelled, to his discomfited followers. "We're overpowered, and we can't tell friend from foe in the dark. Make for the rendezvous and cover your retreat. Once in our stronghold we'll mow them down."

The wily ruffian did not wait to see the result of the conflict, but vaulting into the saddle he spurred the horse away from the combatants. Instead of proceeding to his mountain citadel he dashed away toward Boise City.

"No one saw me or recognized me in that scrape," said he, "and I'll make tracks for Boise City and show myself there in case the finger of suspicion should point to me. Let the boys fight it out. They can afford to receive a wound or two, and I can't; I must appear in good shape when visiting my lady-love. What a lucky thing it was that War-den fell into the chasm! but, what an unfortunate thing it was that we should lose the coach and treasure to-night! Curse those Break-o'-day Boys! They've started the fuss in Rocky Bar and now they've actually come down on our stamping-grounds to make short work of us. Curse the old fool that organized that band. I'll get even with him; I'll make it my business to capture him and make him suffer for this. As for the members of that band they'll find that Blue-Blazes and his men are like dragon's teeth, or at least like sowing them—for we'll spring up with renewed life and for every man I lose I'll have a dozen to fill the vacancy."

Thus communing, Payson rode along at a break-neck pace. He tried to convince himself that the conflict was only a little "rum-pus," and that his desperadoes would lure the Regulators up into the defiles and then destroy them.

"If it comes to the worst we can destroy the whole concern; we can let them enter, but they'll never issue forth alive; I've got that all fixed. There are some of the most deadly compounds known to science under the rock-bound roof of my retreat—dynamite enough to blow the mountain to atoms.

I have that stored in a particular spot. By touching a secret wire I can hurl a hundred tons of rock upon the cans containing the explosive, and then what? Woe to them who are in the cavern at that awful moment!"

As if impressed with the idea of the fearful scene the bandit again urged the panting steed forward. Once or twice he reined in the horse to listen, but no sounds reached his ears. Payson was pursuing his way in a parallel line with the stage-trail, but by short cuts he was rapidly nearing Boise City. He would be enabled to reach the town several hours in advance of the coach.

He felt certain that the treasure-box had escaped his men, and that it was irretrievably lost to him. He grew furious as he contemplated the loss, and earnestly wished that his desperadoes would succeed in luring the Break o' Day Boys into the passes of the mountain.

It was almost daylight when Payson reached the outskirts of the town, and he made his way to a log-shanty perched upon the bluff overlooking a small stream. A villainous-looking specimen of humanity greeted the bandit chief, who, in a few words related the adventure to the occupant of the shanty. Leaving his horse in the care of the man, Payson mounted a fresh steed and spurred into the "city." He made his way to one of the numerous saloons and freely mixed with everybody in the place.

He was greeted upon all sides by the loungers at the tables, and the gamblers looked up from the game to exchange a few words with the genteel ruffian. This was just what Payson desired; although many in the assemblage were leagued with him, yet he wished the majority of those present to believe that he had spent the night in Boise City, and he spared no efforts to convey that idea to all who chanced to speak to him. The cunning rascal had everything arranged to prove an *alibi*, if it came to the worst. But he feared such result. He laughed at the word law. The only real move toward purifying the Salmon River regions had just transpired in the banding together of brave spirits led on by Herbert Gray. The Break o' Day Boys were the only ones who had thus far attempted to check the career of the boasting, lawless mass of humanity that had so long ruled and terrorized the mining districts.

The "millennium" was at hand.

After spending an hour at the gambling saloon, Payson visited a barber shop, and called in the duties of the tonsorial artist. It was while he was seated in that establishment that the stage coach rolled into town, followed by a detachment of mounted men.

In a short space of time the news flew like

wild-fire that the coach had been attacked by Blue-Blazes and his band of road-agents, but the rascals had been routed by the Regulators, and the treasure-box and mail-bags saved intact.

Payson kept shady and strove to learn full particulars of the affair. All that he could ascertain was that his followers had left a number of their dead upon the battle-field, and fled into the fastness of the mountains, closely pursued by a strong detachment of Break o' Day Boys. Payson ground his teeth with rage and inwardly registered a terrible oath of vengeance.

Groups surrounded the coach, and the driver and passengers were given highly-wrought descriptions of the conflict. The bandit chief carefully avoided the thronged street and hurriedly made his way toward Gibson's residence. He soon reached the dwelling and was admitted into the library. Spencer Gibson entered, and his face changed color as he saw his visitor.

"You have called to receive the amount, I dare say," he exclaimed, "but, as I said before, it is not in my power to pay the debt!"

"Yes it is. Your fair daughter once my bride, the debt is canceled. The only obstacle in the way was our young friend, Robert Warden. I am pained to say that he has met with a violent death."

Spencer Gibson started back, nervously, and his voice grew tremulous: "Robert Warden dead?" he gasped.

"Yes; his horse stumbled and hurled the poor young man into a deep chasm. I give you the information just as I received it from an eye-witness," said the scoundrel. "And there is not the least doubt, sir, of his shocking death."

Midst many expressions of sorrow and regret the impostor went on to lament the loss of the young man, and have the certainty of his death impressed upon Gibson's mind.

"Now, sir, you will see at once that the only objection is removed. I would be the last one to intrude upon her grief, and will allow you to arrange matters. I will cancel the debt as soon as she is my wife. Refuse, sir, and I demand payment at once and will have it."

Gibson listened attentively to the scoundrel's words and then arose and faced his visitor.

"Mr. Payson, I want you to remember the conversation we have had on this subject once before. I again tell you that if my child should refuse, I would not lift my little finger to gainsay her wishes. Personally, I dislike you, and I have my reasons. It is plain talk, but there is no need of disguising the fact. You can speak to Elsie and abide by her decision."

Gibson turned to leave the room.

"Stop! one word with you, Spencer Gibson!" cried Payson, also rising from his seat.

"Well, sir, what is it?"

"It is this: You have referred me to your daughter and flatly refused to intercede for me, or to use any authority in the matter?"

"That is it exactly!"

"Now, Spencer Gibson, listen to me. Do you know that, if I foreclose the notes you are rendered homeless—that you must leave this home?"

"I have considered everything," replied the old gentleman firmly. "I have considered my daughter's happiness first of all."

"You refuse to urge my suit? You refuse to use a parent's authority?" cried Payson, whose face was now livid with rage and who was advancing threateningly toward the old gentleman.

"I do refuse, and now, sir, go your way and do your worst! My daughter cannot be sacrificed for my foolish speculation. You have my answer. Go!"

Payson sprung toward the door and intercepted Gibson.

"You do not leave this chamber until you promise to aid me!" exclaimed Gibson. The next moment the bandit leaped upon the old man and bore him to the floor. Gibson uttered one cry, and it was echoed by a female voice in an adjoining apartment.

Payson drew forth a murderous-looking bowie and raised it aloft. Before the blade could descend a form bounded into the room and Payson was seized and hurled to the opposite side of the room.

Had a thunderbolt burst at his feet the villain could not have been more surprised. He gasped and reeled backward as his eyes rested upon the floor.

"Robert Warden! Not dead?" he gasped, and the next instant the scoundrel leaped through the window and fled away as if the spirit of his victim was in rapid pursuit.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED DELIVERANCE.

It will be borne in mind that Robert and Moriarity were plunged into the black chasm after falling from the shattered bridge.

Down—down went the two men into the gloomy gulf, until Patrick brought up with a terrific shock. Scarcely had he experienced the first shock when a second one occurred that left poor Moriarity gasping for wind. Robert had partly fallen upon the Irishman and both men were now swaying over the deep abyss.

About fifteen feet from the brink of the cliff grew a vast number of bushes and young

trees of the mountain ash species. These grew out almost perpendicular in some spots, and then again they shot out over the chasm interlaced with vines and bushes.

It was into one of these curious clumps that both men had fallen, and now hung in mid-air. Each movement threatened to launch them to the awful depths below, for the branches swayed and cracked beneath the combined weight of the two men.

They were compelled to remain perfectly quiet to avoid being precipitated into the unknown depths that yawned below the frail support upon which they clung and rested.

"Och, be gob! Ye knocked the wind out o' me, Masther Robert!" whispered Patrick, faintly; "and it's meself is jist like a bu'sted balloon widout any wind in it at all, at all."

"Heaven be praised, we have been spared a most horrible death. Let us offer up a prayer," said Robert.

"Deed I will, and a barrel ov them," said Pat, earnestly. "It was only through the blissid Saint Patrick—me namesake—that we're spared from a trip down to the bottom and find ouselves all mashed to a jelly. Och, I feel the branches is cracking—my, oh my! if they should break we'd resume our excursion, wouldn't we? I say, Masther Robert, I have about a dozen sharp branches stuck into me ribs like daggers. Och, murther in Irish, if I hadn't grabbed hould of a twig that time I'd been off. Divil a one o' me was ever cut out for a squirrel!"

Moriarity kept up a flow of conversation, and the hours wore on. In the mean time they could observe the men above repairing the bridge, and finally saw the bandits ride across, and the sound of horses' hoofs died away.

The bridge was drawn back, and a death-like stillness reigned.

Robert saw the bandit chief when, torch in hand, he was endeavoring to peer down into the chasm, but the flambeau failed to throw its light far enough to expose the two men upon the vines.

"I wonder where they're all going?" asked Moriarity, in a low whisper.

"On some marauding expedition, no doubt. Now, Patrick, you and I must remain quiet, as we cannot see our exact position. When daylight dawns we can make some effort to extricate ourselves."

But the impatient Irishman could not remain passive. He talked, and moved about, swore at the bandits and at the frail bushes upon which he rested. Although hanging between life and death Moriarity laughed and cheered his companion by his comical remarks, and was about as happy as though he was resting upon a downy couch.

It seemed an age to Warden as he awaited the coming of daylight. Even then no chances of escape might be offered; but, on the contrary, daylight might expose them to the gaze of the desperadoes, and they would again be in the power of the robbers. Robert imparted his fears to his companion.

"It's out of the frying-pan intill the fire, onyways," replied Patrick. "If we fall down we'll be kilt, and if the spalpeens catch us maybe we moight give 'em the slip. If we're kilt now wid a fall how can we have a chance—eh?"

Robert saw that there was a chance even if they fell into the hands of Payson and his men. It was a very faint chance to be sure but both men eagerly grasped at this little "straw."

The gray dawn was just beginning to dispel the shadows when a hurried clattering of hoofs was borne to the ears of the men in the chasm. Nearer and nearer came the horsemen at a break-neck pace. They came to the verge of the Abyss and the signal resounded. Then the secret bridge swung down over the chasm and the mounted men dashed across the structure. In a very short time the portcullis had swung back into its place again.

"That manes something," said Pat. "It manes that somebody's afther the spalpeens and they've been gitting a walloping."

Moriarity was right. It was a detachment of routed bandits fleeing before the victorious Break-o'-day Boys. Their superior horses had saved them from the Regulators. Robert could hear the pursuers searching in the vicinity of the cliff, they never once dreaming that the desperadoes had crossed the chasm, for nothing greeted their gaze but the jagged, rocky wall opposite. Robert was on the point of hailing the unknown horsemen when a commotion far down in the depths of the chasm attracted his attention.

From his lofty point of observation the young man saw a small group of mounted men coming rapidly through the deep ravine. They came onward as if pursued, also. They halted directly beneath the clump of bushes and trees. One of their number dismounted, and going to the side of the chasm seemed to touch some concealed piece of machinery, for a tremendous rock turned upon a pivot and disclosed an aperture large enough to admit men and horses. Even as the two men gazed down, bewildered, the group of bandits disappeared and the rock swung back into its place.

The bottom of the chasm was again deserted.

"Well, now, look at that," whispered Pat. "Isn't that like the forty thaves, and we're

ould Alley Barber a-watchin' ov them. Am I awake or is it a nightmare I'm a-ridin'?"

Moriarity rubbed his eyes to assure himself that he saw aright.

"This is the most perfect organization that ever infested a country," said Robert; "and the master-mind of the band is certainly the most consummate villain that ever lived. Everything is perfect, and one would imagine that this was a band of robbers such as we read of during the Middle Ages, instead of a league of the present time. It will be hard to destroy them, but I'm sure it will be done."

"Begob! we'd better think of saving our own bacon, now that we have a chance, or some o' the spalpeens in the rocks will cook it for us. Hear the men above? I'll holler to them. I have a voice like a bull."

Moriarity uttered a shout that awoke strange echoes in that dismal chasm, then he uttered several more in quick succession. To his delight he saw a face peering over into the abyss. Then the owner of the face thrust a pistol downward toward the two men upon the clumps, and his voice was borne distinctly to their ears.

"Here's two of the infernal scoundrels down here, a-hanging onto some bushes. Shall I blaze away at them?"

"Hould on! hould on!" roared Moriarity. "We don't belong to the blackguards that yeas are afther! We're two dacint min. Here's Robert Warden, a gentleman, and here's mesilf, Pathrick Moriarity, esquare, an honest man an' a scholard!"

As Pat roared out this the pistol was withdrawn, and the hum of the Regulators' voices told that they were engaged in consultation.

So far the bandits within the stronghold had remained perfectly quiet, although they could see their foes by peering through the numerous apertures in the rocks.

It was a dread silence that boded no good to the daring Regulators. Finally, a coil of rope was lowered down from the brink of the chasm by several Regulators, and the two men upon the swaying bushes eagerly grasped it. Hardly was the rope in the hands of the Irishman when a volley of firearms rung out from the side of the robbers' "Gibraltar."

Tongues of flame spat out from the rocky wall from twenty different places, and the Break-o'-Day Boys fell back, confused, leaving half of their number dead upon the fatal spot. The rest retreated beyond the shelter of huge rocks, and returned a brisk but harmless fire. The bandits had gained an unimportant victory, but exposed their retreat.

"Now, thin, grab the rope, and we'll thry

to rache the bottom," cried Moriarity. "If we stay here we'll get the same kind ov a dose! They know we're here, and the sooner we skip the better."

Even as he was talking, Patrick secured one end of the rope and allowed the other end to trail down into the depths of the chasm. It lacked many feet of touching the rocky bottom. A few bruises and a lacerated pair of hands rewarded Pat's efforts, but he was safe. Robert soon followed his example, and the two men stood for a moment to recover themselves, and then darted away through the winding chasm. Not a moment too soon, for, just as they disappeared into the shadows of a sharp bend, the huge rock covering the entrance in the ravine swung around, and a dozen desperadoes, armed to the teeth, appeared. One glance upward and the bare bushes and trailing rope told the tale.

With yells of rage they started in pursuit. The fugitives made good use of their time, and had almost reached the terminus of the chasm, when, to their great joy, they discovered a powerful horse without a rider. A few yards further the dead body of the outlaw horseman lay upon the ground. Wounded in the conflict, he had ridden away to die almost within sight of the stronghold. Robert vaulted into the saddle and Moriarity clung on behind him. Away sped the fugitives toward Boise City.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRONGHOLD A STRONGHOLD NO MORE.

ROBERT WARDEN arrived in Boise City and immediately rode toward Gibson's residence. Just as he entered the door he heard the scream of a woman. It was Elsie's voice, and the young man leaped forward in the direction from whence it proceeded. The library was to the right of the corridor, and the door stood partly open. One glance revealed Gibson prostrate upon the floor, and the assassin's hand, raised to strike the fatal blow.

One bound placed Robert beside the villain, and the next moment the would-be murderer was hurled aside.

Both men evinced a mutual surprise. Payson turned ghastly white as he beheld the man whom he supposed to be lying mangled in the chasm. And Robert was astonished to find Payson when he supposed the villain to be with his outlaw band many miles away from Boise City.

Before Robert could recover from his surprise Payson had dashed through the window, and Elsie had quickly glided into the room, and flung her arms about her lover's neck.

Robert had barely time to receive Gibson's thanks, and to press his lips to Elsie's, when two pistol-shots rung out close to the house, and confused shouts followed the discharge of firearms. Moriarity bounded into the room and joyfully exclaimed:

"They've got him! He's cotched! They've nabbed the feller they calls Blue Blazes!"

Robert advanced to the window, and in the midst of an excited group he saw Payson. Whispering a few words to Elsie, the young man, followed by Moriarity and the old gent, made his way toward the assemblage. Payson's eyes rested upon Warden as he approached, and the malignant gleam told of the intense hate and disappointment he experienced at that moment.

The tall figure of Herbert Gray appeared in the midst of the noisy crowd, and the chief of the Regulators strode before the cringing desperado.

"So you are the villain who has been masquerading as Blue-Blazes? Scoundrel, what have you done with my daughter, my beautiful Edith?" thundered Herbert Gray.

"I have not seen her," replied Payson coolly.

"Liar! You lured her into these wild regions, basely betrayed and deserted her. Tell me where to find her, or a father's vengeance will strike you where you stand!"

"I last saw her in Rocky Bar," said Payson; "she still resides there!"

"Hold on there!" cried the stout personage acting as Sheriff of Boise City. "I can throw some light on the matter, and so can this young man."

The sheriff pointed toward Robert Warden and continued: "We saw your daughter fall dead at that villain's feet, and we registered an oath to track down her betrayer. Gentlemen, that's the scoundrel! Payson's the man, and here's the proof of his guilt in Edith Gray's own handwriting."

The sheriff produced the paper upon which the unfortunate girl had traced the accusation.

For a moment did the grief-stricken father gaze upon the well-known handwriting, while large tears trickled down upon his bronzed cheeks.

Even while Herbert Gray was perusing the paper Payson scanned the sea of faces around him and a quick glance passed between the outlaw chief and a confederate in the assemblage. A second later and the person had elbowed his way toward the captured bandit, and, unperceived, Payson skillfully passed a folded paper into the hand of the fellow. The man slowly drew away and quickly read the contents of the note and destroyed it. He spoke to several others

and two of the number cautiously crept away toward Gibson's residence while the remainder mingled with the crowd surrounding the bandit leader.

"Villain!" cried Herbert Gray, as he dashed aside the paper. "You have killed my child and her blood cries aloud for vengeance. I have trailed you to these regions and devoted my life to exterminating men of your class. You have escaped me up to the present time but your time has arrived. Mount that horse!"

The road-agent was assisted upon the bare back of a horse, and with hands tied and guarded by a cordon of armed men, the desperado was hastened beneath the stout limb of a tree close by.

Several Regulators hurried in advance and fastened a rope to the limb and arranged a noose in the end of the "hemp." Payson's face became livid with fear as he saw the preparations and beheld the rope swinging as if awaiting its victim with horrid glee.

A moment later and he was beneath the limb still on the horse's back, and the rope was just in the act of being adjusted when the horse sprung forward suddenly. Several forms darted in advance to intercept the animal but the frightened beast bounded onward.

One of the group while pretending to grasp at the animal contrived to place a knife in the hands of the road-agent even though they were secured behind his back. At the same moment he administered a sharp blow upon the horse's flanks as if done accidentally and then fired a harmless shot at the escaping bandit. Payson used his heels to urge the steed forward, and fairly screamed to add to its speed.

Revolvers cracked upon all sides but the escaping robber lay flat upon the horse's neck to escape the leaden hail.

With the sharp knife he slashed and cut at the rope binding his arms, regardless of the blade cutting into his flesh. A few more efforts and his hands were free; then he put the horse to its topmost speed. Payson was an excellent horseman and he showed his skill in directing the horse into breakneck places to elude his pursuers, who came on, just beyond pistol-shot like a swarm of wolves. At the head of the Regulators rode Herbert Gray, his keen eyes fixed upon the fugitive and striving to overtake the desperado.

"Satan takes care of his own, it seems," said Gray, in tones of disappointment. Yet he followed the escaping ruffian like a sleuth-hound.

Payson was making for his stronghold in the mountains, while the Regulators followed on his track scarcely ever losing sight of the

fugitive and firing at him whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Moriarity was foremost in the band of horseman following Herbert Gray's leadership in the chase after the ruffian. The Irishman knew that Payson was exerting himself to reach his mountain citadel.

In the mean time a startling scene had been enacted in Gibson's home. While Robert and the old gentleman were mingling with the group surrounding Payson, several ill-looking fellows had forced an entrance into the house, and, stilling the cries of the unsuspecting girl, one had seized and borne her to a horse close by and with the maiden in his arms the rascal had dashed away. The remaining ruffian also mounted, but covered his brother bandit's retreat. One despairing cry came from Elsie's lips as she was hurried away. That cry reached the ears of her lover who quickly sprung toward the house. The two ruffians were dashing away and the fair girl was seen in the arms of the foremost villain.

By the time Robert had secured a horse and given the alarm the abductors had a good start of the pursuing party. At the very same moment Payson led the Regulators away at a right angle and a double chase began.

Both parties were making for the lurking-place of the robber league. Mile after mile flew beneath the hoofs of the horses, and a wild region was soon traversed and the vicinity of the stronghold reached.

Moriarity broke away from the group of horsemen and pursued a course which he knew led to the bottom of the chasm. Payson's course seemed to indicate that he was making for the summit to cross the Abyss by means of the bridge.

Moriarity was soon in the dismal precincts of the deep ravine and he continued toward the spot where both he and Robert had observed the secret entrance.

Patrick dismounted and went forward toward the clump of bushes which he could see far above. The rope still trailed downward.

Patrick was just about to give vent to an expression when the sound of horses' hoofs in the ravine caused him to sink down behind a giant boulder and lie perfectly still. On came the horsemen—two bandits, one bearing the senseless form of Elsie Gibson in his arms. They paused near a huge slab and signaled upon it.

The bandit had scarcely uttered the signal when Moriarity leaped from behind the rock—revolvers grasped in each hand, and, quick as the lightning's stroke, the Irishman had discharged his weapons full at the heads of the two ruffians. He caught Elsie in his

arms as the bandit's hold relaxed. Both outlaws fell from their horses to the rocky surface of the ravine. At the same moment the huge rock began to revolve upon its pivot. An opening appeared and a face protruded from the aperture. Patrick stepped forward and presented his pistol at the fellow's head.

"Come out o' that immediately!" cried Moriarity. "Come out, or be jabers I'll introoce ye to a bullet!"

The ruffian came forth from the secret opening and his eyes rested upon his fallen comrades.

"Turn yer back and don't look 'round," shouted Moriarity, flourishing his pistol with one hand and supporting Elsie with his disengaged hand. The bandit obeyed the order, and Moriarity gently placed the maiden upon a large boulder and turned his attention to the outlaw. Moriarity began a conversation with imaginary confederates, to lead the ruffian into believing that a number of men were concealed at hand, and ready to obey his orders.

"Don't turn 'round, ye blaggard ye!" he cried. "If he turns 'round, one o' yeess shoot him. The rest of yeess kape yer eyes upon that door and peg away at any one that show their mug to yeess. Put yer hands behind ye. That's right! Now come out here, Tim Monahan, and tie the hands ov him. Don't turn 'round, ye spaldeen, or I'll keel ye over."

Moriarity kept up a running conversation with his imaginary comrades, and when the bandit had placed his hands behind him, Pat soon secured them with a stout strap taken from the horse's bridle.

"Now, thin, me gentleman! I'll put a rag forninst yer eyes, and thin we'll l'ave you here for awhile."

Pat blindfolded his captive, and had scarcely accomplished the task when a signal sounded far above, and he saw the bridge slowly swung across the chasm. The Irishman knew that Payson had reached the brink of the Abyss and had signaled to cross over into his stronghold.

A few moments later and Payson dashed across the bridge and entered his cavern. Strange to say, the bridge remained down as if inviting the pursuers to venture across. The road-agent was evidently striving to lure his pursuers into the cavern. Blinded by his desire for vengeance, Herbert Gray followed the ruffian into his den, and close behind him came a score of Break-o'-Day Boys. The crack of firearms told that a desperate conflict was raging within the robbers' stronghold.

Moriarity seized Elsie and bore her away from the spot. He had not traversed twenty

rods before Robert Warden appeared in the ravine, and the Irishman placed the lovely girl in the arms of the young man.

"Don't stay in the ravine, Masther Robert, for it's mesilf that thinks the robbers will be thryng to escape by this rock down here, and I'm going to block their game!" cried Patrick, and he hastily retraced his steps toward the swinging rock.

He had almost reached the rock in question when he saw a form emerge from the entrance, Moriarity dropped down behind a mass of granite, and peered forth at the person. It was Payson! His features were bloodstained, and one hand was bound with a handkerchief. He staggered forth from the entrance and paused.

"I'll launch them all into eternity," he howled. "No one knows of the terrible doom awaiting the captors of my fortress. And my plan will now come in to wipe out my foes and avenge my fallen comrades. One pull at the concealed wire in this entrance and 'tis done!"

He re-entered the opening, and when he had disappeared in its gloom, Moriarity leaped forward and swung the rock into its socket and rolled several boulders before it to prevent the bandit from again using it as an exit. He then sped away down the ravine as fast as he could.

While speeding away Moriarity heard the clatter of hoofs and the shouts of men as both horses and riders swept across the bridge retreating from the caverns of the bandit league. Then came a dull rumbling sound from the innermost depths of the mountain—a terrific upheaval of the earth as though a violent earthquake swept through the masses of rock. A blinding glare leaped into the air. Rocks fell in giant fragments into the chasm, literally choking up the ravine. Payson had exploded his mine, but his own band of cut-throats had been swallowed up in the work of destruction. Not a vestige of the stronghold remained.

Payson was buried beneath the huge masses of granite while vainly seeking an outlet into the chasm. Nearly all of the Re-

gulators succeeded in escaping the awful effects of the explosion.

Thanks to Patrick's speed he was well out of the ravine when the fearful detonation took place and the masses of rock were hurled into the abyss. The destruction of Blue-Blazes and his league was complete.

An awful crater marked the spot of the famous stronghold, and it is still shown to the tourist who wanders into the wild range of mountains, and the guide tells the story of the infamous band of outlaws and shows the ravine with its mass of granite—assuring the listener that beneath the fragments lie the bones of the daring desperado, "Blue-Blazes."

Herbert Gray still continues in the good work of weeding out bad characters from the mining towns of the region.

Pat Moriarity is still in the employ of Spencer Gibson, and after informing the reader that Robert Warden is a happy husband and Elsie Gibson is his wife, we will add but a few words to conclude our story.

As Payson's notes were never presented, Gibson found himself on the high road to prosperity and never again speculated in "wild-cat" stocks. It was evident that Payson had lured the old gentleman into idle speculations purposely to have him in his power. He had robbed and cheated his victim in order to accomplish his designs. It was a bitter lesson, but Spencer Gibson profited by it.

Robert was happy in the love of the noble girl he adored and their days were happiness and sunshine.

Occasionally Herbert Gray calls to visit his young friend as the secret service compels them to consult one another frequently. Elsie often visits a little grave and places fresh flowers upon a small tombstone bearing the name of *Edith Gray*.

We will conclude by reporting Moriarity's remarks.

"Masther Robert, will yez do me a favor?"

"Anything, my dear friend. What favor shall I grant you?"

"*If it's a boy will ye call him Patrick?*"

"I will!"

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